



Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads (CHaRMED):

Results from a Qualitative Study of Staff and Participant Experiences in Nine Fatherhood Programs

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Overview

Introduction

Fathers, children, and their families benefit from healthy coparenting and romantic relationships. Healthy relationships can improve fathers' mental health and the quality of their involvement with their children, and can support positive health and developmental outcomes for children. In accordance with legislation authorizing Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programming, the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) requires relationship education and activities to promote or sustain marriage as part of their Responsible Fatherhood (RF) grant programs. RF programs aim to improve relationship skills such as communication, conflict resolution, and problem solving to support fathers' coparenting and romantic relationships.

Research that explores the design of select federally funded fatherhood programs suggests variation in the design and delivery of healthy relationship content. Further, it is not clear whether or how this content is responsive to fathers' diverse relationship contexts or the needs of fathers and their families. Gaining a better understanding of how fatherhood programs design and deliver coparenting and romantic relationship services, as well as how fathers perceive and engage in those services, can help ensure that these programs are better equipped to support fathers' healthy relationships.

Primary Research Objectives

This study aimed to:

1. Better understand the approaches that fatherhood programs use to support fathers' healthy coparenting and romantic relationships.
2. Explore fathers' perceptions of and needs around relationship programming.
3. Examine whether and how programs respond to those needs.

Purpose and Structure

The purpose of this report is to inform both ACF and the broader fatherhood practice and research fields about the ways in which fatherhood programs support, or could better support, fathers' healthy coparenting and romantic relationships. First, we introduce the CHaRMED study goals and methodology. Next, we explore six key themes that emerged from interviews conducted with program staff, fathers, and coparents across nine programs. Finally, we offer considerations for fatherhood program practitioners and researchers moving forward.

Key Findings and Highlights

- **Fatherhood programs support healthy relationships through multiple services and strategies.** These approaches include curriculum-based workshops, one-on-one support, referrals to supplemental services, and coparent and family engagement in workshops and in other activities outside of the program. During the COVID-19 pandemic, programs have adapted by using multiple virtual approaches, which may be integrated into their models moving forward.
- **Fathers engage in healthy relationship content once they feel connected to the program.** While most fathers are not drawn initially to fatherhood programs because of a desire to improve their

coparenting or romantic relationships, they ultimately found value in healthy relationship content. Staff stressed that establishing this connection with fathers can require intensive intake efforts and engagement up front to gain fathers' trust and create excitement about the fatherhood program as a whole.

- **Safe group spaces invite discussions around healthy relationships.** Fathers spoke of the “brotherhood” that forms with others in their cohort. Staff play a critical role in creating a safe space that allows for honest discussions and peer learning around relationships.
- **Staff and participants view healthy relationship content as relevant and useful for fathers' coparenting relationships.** Staff described a tendency for discussions about healthy relationships during workshops and one-on-one engagement to focus more on coparenting than on romantic relationships, often due to greater challenges faced by fathers in their coparenting relationships than in their romantic relationships. Many fathers reported learning skills that they use to address these challenges.
- **Meaningful engagement of coparents in relationship programming is seen as beneficial, but with important tradeoffs and logistical challenges.** For fathers and staff, there is a distinct tension between the value of coparent involvement in fatherhood programming and the need to respect a fathers-only space. Programs also reported challenges to successfully engaging coparents in programming, particularly when coparents and fathers were no longer in romantic relationships.
- **Fathers see access to children as a key challenge in their lives, which is complicated by challenging coparenting relationships and by legal and social systems.** Some fathers described contentious coparenting relationships and legal and social systems as important factors that influence their ability to see their children and maintain relationships with them.

Methods

The CHaRMED project team conducted a qualitative study with nine fatherhood programs across the United States. The study consisted of semi-structured telephone interviews with fatherhood program staff (n= 24), participating fathers (n= 36), and coparents of participating fathers (n= 6). The interviews assessed fathers' and program staff's perceptions of coparenting and romantic relationship services, fathers' engagement in the services, and perspectives on how fatherhood programs support, or could better support, the needs of fathers and their families. Interviews were transcribed and coded for emerging themes. Interviews were supplemented by a review of program curricula to determine the focus, goals, duration, and target audiences for relationship-related program content.

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Glossary

ACF – Administration for Children and Families

AIAN – American Indian or Alaska Native

CHaRMED – Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads

Coparenting Relationships – Relationships between any two or more adults as it relates to their shared responsibility for raising a child. The adults may or may not be romantically involved.

COVID - Coronavirus disease, also known as COVID-19

Healthy Relationships - High-quality coparenting and romantic relationships, often characterized by qualities such as respectful communication, high levels of relationship satisfaction, or cooperation between coparents

OFA – Office of Family Assistance

OPRE – Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation

RF – Responsible Fatherhood

Romantic Relationships – Relationships among two individuals who are dating, committed, or married

Introduction

Fathers, children, and their families benefit from healthy coparenting and romantic relationships. Healthy relationships can improve fathers' mental health and wellbeing and increase involvement with their children.^{1,2,3,4} Likewise, children's exposure to parents with high-quality relationships can support a range of positive health and developmental outcomes.⁵ For instance, positive coparenting relationships are linked to fewer behavior problems and better social skills in children.⁶ Moreover, negative or conflictual coparenting or romantic relationships can be particularly harmful to children. Children exposed to these types of relationships are at risk for behaviors like aggression and hyperactivity, poor social skills, slowed cognitive and language development, and difficulties managing their emotions.^{5,6,7,8,9}

Given the importance of healthy relationships for fathers and their families, a key goal of many fatherhood programs—human service programs designed specifically for fathers—is to support fathers' coparenting and romantic relationships. Fatherhood programs operate in communities across the United States and may receive local, state, or federal funding. At the federal level, Responsible Fatherhood (RF) grant programming overseen by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF) requires relationship education and activities to promote or sustain marriage, per the authorizing legislation.¹⁰ To meet this requirement, RF programs aim to improve a range of relationship skills for both coparenting and romantic relationships. These skills include communication, conflict resolution, and problem solving.¹¹

Although many fatherhood programs aim to support fathers' relationships, it is not clear how programs are structured to meet this goal.

Recent research exploring select RF programs suggests the way they design and deliver services to support relationships is diverse.¹² This variation includes the amount of time dedicated to relationship content, the focus of that content, how the content is delivered, and whether other adults with whom fathers have a relationship also participate (e.g., coparents or romantic partners). Additional research suggests that relationship-focused content is often integrated across parenting, relationships, and personal development workshops.¹³ Given this variation in how healthy relationship content is delivered, there is a need to comprehensively document the specific strategies and approaches that fatherhood programs use to address healthy relationships.

Further, it is not clear whether or how healthy relationship services in fatherhood programs are responsive to fathers' diverse relationship contexts. Between July 2016 and March 2019, RF programs served fathers with varied relationship statuses, including fathers that were married (25%), unmarried but in romantic relationships (28%), "on again off again" (8%), or not in current relationships (37%).¹⁴ Living arrangements also varied for unmarried fathers in relationships, with fathers reporting living with their current partner some or most of the time (36%), all of the time (34%) or none of the time (21%). In addition, qualitative studies of fathers served by RF programs point to a broad range in the quality of participating fathers'

Report Terminology

In this report, we use the term **relationships** to refer to both coparenting and romantic relationships in a father's life.

- **Coparenting relationships** are relationships between any two or more adults as it relates to their shared responsibility for raising a child. The adults may or may not be romantically involved.
- **Romantic relationships** are relationships among two individuals who are dating, committed, or married.
- **Healthy relationships** are high-quality coparenting and romantic relationships, often characterized by qualities such as respectful communication, high levels of relationship satisfaction, or cooperation between coparents.

coparenting relationships, ranging from cooperative to conflicted or disengaged.^{15,16} These varied coparenting and romantic relationships suggest that fathers are likely to enter programs with different relationship service needs.

Many fathers in fatherhood programs also face important challenges that can affect their ability to form and maintain healthy relationships. A number of life stressors, including unemployment, incarceration, and increasing family complexity (e.g., coparenting with more than one person, having children across households, having a romantic partner who is not a primary coparent) can disrupt high-quality coparenting and parenting and lead to diminished relationship quality.^{15,16,17,18,19} Fatherhood programs should draw on fathers' diverse characteristics and needs to help support their relationships and address a broader set of barriers and challenges that they may face in establishing positive relationships with their partners and/or children. Understanding how programs are currently working to meet these needs and how fathers perceive and engage in these services can help future fatherhood programs effectively tailor their healthy relationship content.

To understand how fatherhood programs address fathers' relationships, Child Trends conducted the Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads (CHaRMED) study. This study, funded by OFA and overseen by the ACF Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), engaged fathers and program staff at fatherhood programs across the United States to better understand the approaches that these programs use to support fathers' healthy coparenting and romantic relationships, explore fathers' perceptions of and needs around relationship programming, and examine whether and how programs respond to those needs. This report reviews the findings of this study and provides ACF and the broader fatherhood research and practice fields with recommendations for tailoring their efforts to best support fathers' healthy coparenting and romantic relationships.

CHaRMED Study Objectives

- Better understand the approaches fatherhood programs use to support fathers' healthy coparenting and romantic relationships
- Explore fathers' perceptions of and needs around relationship programming
- Examine whether and how programs respond to those needs



Methodology

Recruitment and data collection for the CHaRMED study occurred from March through December 2020. We selected programs for participation based on various characteristics, including geographic location, source of funding, and populations served. We also aimed to enroll programs with a range of approaches to addressing fathers' coparenting and/or romantic relationships. The nine programs operated in four U.S. regions, including the South, West, Midwest, and Mid-Atlantic and Northeast (Figure 1). Seven were federally funded through the RF grant program. Programs reported serving fathers from a variety of racial and ethnic identities: Three programs reported that the majority of their fathers served identified as Black, three reported majority White, two reported majority Hispanic or Latinx fathers, and one reported majority American Indian or Alaska Native (AIAN).ⁱ A majority also reported serving or engaging fathers' coparents or spouses in some capacity, such as through invitations to participate in program sessions or events. Notably, all programs operated with a cohort model, such that fathers started the program together and participated as a group throughout the program's duration.

The study team coordinated with program directors at each program to recruit participants for interviews. Across the nine programs, we conducted 24 telephone interviews with program staff, comprised of 10 program directors and 14 facilitators, and 36 fathers.ⁱⁱ We also interviewed six coparents of fathers across four programs.ⁱⁱⁱ

Interviews explored a range of topics related to relationship programming and fathers' relationship needs. Interviews with program staff focused on the content and delivery of relationship services, whether and how programs engaged coparents, priorities for hiring and staffing for healthy relationship programming, and perceptions of fathers' strengths and needs related to coparenting and romantic relationships. Interviews with fathers explored their experiences and needs related to coparenting and romantic relationships, perceptions of relationships services offered by the programs, and levels of engagement in these services. The interviews with coparents sought to understand how they viewed the fathers' participation in relationship services and whether and how they themselves engaged with the program.

Figure 1. Snapshot of Nine CHaRMED Programs



ⁱ During interviews, staff and fathers used a variety of terms to refer to American Indian populations. Throughout this report, we use the term AIAN in an effort to be inclusive while recognizing the diversity of Indigenous communities. However, we acknowledge this term may not resonate with all American Indian populations. Terms other than AIAN may be used in quotes from staff and fathers.

ⁱⁱ Transcripts from two interviews with fathers were excluded from the formal analysis. One was excluded due to audio recording and transcription issues. Another was excluded upon the discovery that the father did not participate in the same version of the fatherhood program as others interviewed from that site.

ⁱⁱⁱ In recruitment, coparents were defined as anyone with whom fathers shared responsibility for raising a child. They may or may not have been romantically involved with the father.





In addition to interviews, the study team reviewed all program curricula with coparenting or romantic relationship content implemented by participating programs. The review provided insight into the curricula's overall focus, goals, duration, and target audiences. Results from this review are summarized in **Appendix A** and may serve as a reference for readers looking to learn more about these curricula and how they are meant to be delivered.

For more detailed information on our study approach, procedures, and analyses, please see **Appendix B**.

Characteristics of Fathers and Coparents in the Study

Table 1 displays key demographics of the fathers and coparents in our sample. Two thirds of fathers identified as Black or White and most were between 25 and 44 years old (75%). Half of the fathers we spoke to reported completing some college and a majority were currently employed full time (64%). Among our sample of six coparents, most identified as White (66%) and were between 25 and 44 years old (83%). All coparents reported having at least a high school diploma or GED, and most were employed full time (83%).

Table 1. Demographics of fathers and coparents enrolled in the CHaRMED study

Characteristics	Fathers (N=36)	Coparents (N=6)
 Age		
18-24 years	1	0
25-34 years	13	3
35-44 years	14	2
45-54 years	6	0
55 years or older	2	1
 Race/ethnicity		
Hispanic or Latinx	8	1
American Indian/Alaska Native	2	0
Non-Hispanic White	12	4
Non-Hispanic Black	14	1
 Education		
Less than high school	2	0
High school or GED	10	1
Vocational/technical certification	2	1
Some college, no B.A.	18	1
B.A. or higher	4	2
 Employment status		
Employed - full time	23	4
Employed - part time or variable hours	3	1
Unemployed - looking for work	6	1
Unemployed - not looking for work	4	0

The majority of fathers we interviewed were in a romantic relationship at the time of the interview (Figure 2). Most fathers reported having 1-2 children. Over half reported coparenting (i.e., sharing responsibility for raising a child) with one mother; one third reported coparenting with two or more mothers. Of the coparents we spoke with, five of the six were currently in a relationship with a father who participated in the program. One coparent reported sharing a child but not being romantically involved with the father.

Limitations

There are a few key limitations to the study. It is not the goal of qualitative research to be generalizable, and the programs and participants enrolled in our study may not capture the full diversity of fatherhood programs and their participants. For example, while fatherhood programs have been shown to use both cohort and drop-in models,¹² all programs in our study used cohort models.^{iv} Nevertheless, we believe that our established program selection criteria (e.g., geographic location, populations served, type of relationship-focused programming) allowed for a range of program approaches to be represented. Additionally, the data we collected on fathers during the interviews suggests that the sample of fathers in this study is comparable to that of RF programs broadly. For example, like fathers in our study, the fathers enrolled in the most recent cohort of RF programs tended to identify as Black or White, had an average of two children, and were mixed in terms of current relationship status.¹⁴ Importantly, while we collected demographic information from fathers and coparents, this information was not linked to individual interviews. We therefore did not explore differences in perceptions and experiences by race or ethnicity.

We relied on program directors to identify program staff, fathers, and coparents who were willing to participate. It is possible that this strategy may have favored those more likely to speak positively about programming and led to a less diverse range of perspectives. We attempted to minimize this bias by stressing our interest in hearing a variety of perspectives, reiterating that participant responses would not be linked to a particular program, and asking program directors to recruit “nonparticipating” fathers (fathers who did not complete healthy relationship services due to time, interest, or other circumstances). Notably, program directors reported facing challenges in identifying and contacting both nonparticipating fathers and coparents. This was often due to the fact that program contact lists were composed of fathers (not coparents), and because fathers that do not complete programming can be difficult to locate. Ultimately, we recruited four nonparticipating fathers and six coparents. We absorbed the four nonparticipating fathers into our sample of fathers because the interviews explored similar topics and we had no reason to believe that these fathers differed demographically from the fathers who completed the programs. Due to their small sample size and differences in interview questions, we excluded coparent interviews from our formal analysis and instead integrated their perspectives throughout our findings, when applicable.

Figure 2. Fathers' Family and Relationship Characteristics



The majority of fathers were either **not currently in a romantic relationship (40%)** or **married (31%)** at the time of the interview.



Most fathers reported **having 1-2 minor children (63%)**; Nearly one quarter of fathers reported having **3-4 children (23%)**.



Over half of the fathers reported **coparenting minor children with one mother (56%)**; over a third reported **coparenting minor children with two or more mothers (36%)**.



One third of fathers reported that **all of their children lived with them all or most of the time (34%)** while another third were **living apart from all of their children (34%)**.

^{iv} Drop-in program models use stand-alone workshop sessions to deliver program content. Unlike cohort models, in which fathers move through a program as a cohesive group, drop-in workshop sessions do not build off one another and program participants are therefore not required to complete all program components.

Finally, recruitment and data collection began in March 2020, which coincided with the early stages of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, leading to some challenges. The outbreak of this respiratory virus led to widespread, mandated closures of businesses and organizations throughout the United States. As a result, many fatherhood programs were required to pause in-person programming and ultimately switch to remote services. The study team had to adjust plans for in-person program visits to be fully remote. For example, we decided not to conduct focus groups per our original study design and instead conducted in-depth interviews with fathers and coparents, since those could more easily be done remotely. Moreover, when data collection started, most programs were in the midst of a difficult and time-intensive transition to remote programming, which limited program staff's capacity to identify and connect our team with fathers and coparents. Although interview questions were largely focused on programming and experiences prior to COVID, our team incorporated several questions into the interview protocols about the impact of COVID on programming and relationships, and this topic also arose organically during interviews. We include any salient details related to COVID throughout the report and plan to explore this topic in greater detail in a forthcoming brief.



Findings

Below we present key findings that fall into six broad themes. These themes highlight strategies that fatherhood programs in our sample use to deliver healthy relationship content, respond to fathers' relationship needs, and promote engagement in coparenting and romantic relationship programming.

Overview of Key Themes

Theme 1: Fatherhood programs support healthy relationships through multiple services and strategies

Theme 2: Fathers engage in healthy relationship content once they feel connected to the program

Theme 3: Safe group spaces invite discussions around healthy relationships

Theme 4: Staff and participants view healthy relationship content as relevant and useful for fathers' coparenting relationships

Theme 5: Meaningful engagement of coparents in relationship programming is seen as beneficial but with important tradeoffs and logistical challenges

Theme 6: Fathers see access to children as a key challenge in their lives, which is complicated by challenging coparenting relationships and legal and social systems

► Theme 1. Fatherhood Programs Support Healthy Relationships through Multiple Services and Strategies

“ [Relationships are] definitely a priority for us because we know that at the end of the day, if this father has truly learned things from our group sessions, through our one-on-one sessions, through our components of the program, through our engagement...they will be better providers to their children.

-Program Facilitator

Program staff described multiple ways in which they support fathers in establishing and maintaining healthy relationships. These approaches tended to fall into four categories: curriculum-based workshops, case management and other modes of one-on-one support, referrals to supplemental relationship services, and coparent and family engagement.

Healthy relationship programming is mainly delivered through curriculum-based workshops

Services to support healthy relationships were most often delivered through curriculum-based workshops. These structured, in-person meetings provided important opportunities for fathers to build tangible skills, learn from others, and practice self-reflection and self-discovery. Workshops lasted from 3 to 24 weeks and often occurred at night and on weekends. All programs described operating with a cohort model, in

which fathers progressed through the program as a cohesive group. During COVID, programs shifted to virtual formats, which included live (e.g., Zoom video calls or Facebook live streaming) and self-paced components (e.g., pre-recorded videos uploaded to YouTube). Some programs discussed plans to incorporate digital approaches into existing programming once in-person classes resume, primarily as a way to address transportation barriers. One facilitator said, “I’m already thinking, ‘Man, this is probably going to be a part of our ongoing service platform’... the issue of how do we reach the entire county all of a sudden becomes a lot simpler if this is one of the vehicles that we can use for it.”

The nine programs drew from 14 different curricula with coparenting and romantic relationship content for these workshops. These curricula focused on either fatherhood and/or parenting education (12) or relationship education (2). Half of the curricula targeted fathers broadly while the other half were meant for use with specific populations. For example, three targeted fathers currently or previously involved in the justice system, one was designed for fathers or families experiencing risk factors such as substance use, and one focused on recently divorced fathers who do not have custody of their children. While most curricula were designed for fathers only, about half (6) were designed to engage coparents or partners as well.

Curricula were most often manualized and/or publicly available. However, staff from four programs reported tailoring or even developing their own curriculum. In most cases, this was done to meet the needs of a program or specific population. For example, one program described designing their own strengths-based curriculum out of a desire to appeal to the range of fathers enrolled in their program. The program director recalled that in designing the curriculum, they wanted to “help [fathers] identify their strengths because ...they have a lot of successes they don’t know about.” In another instance, a program serving AIAN fathers spoke of supplementing an existing curriculum with case examples that better reflected the day-to-day lives of fathers in the program. When asked how their curriculum could better meet the needs of AIAN fathers, program staff explained:

[The curriculum] is a wonderful curriculum, there's no doubt. And the content is fantastic. If you take the content, there's no problem with that. But as to the actual examples and the actual setting that you're going to provide that content, it is not as appropriate as [a curriculum created for Native American fathers] ... And that was the deal, is the spiritual side. And we're not talking religion here. We're talking a spiritual connection ... In Native American, in Indian culture, that's a very big part.

Workshop sessions focused on healthy relationships tended to center on areas such as communication, conflict management, emotional self-regulation, and problem solving. Facilitators described leading activities that were designed to reinforce comfort and camaraderie among fathers while gradually building core skills. These activities included group discussions and interactive exercises such as role-plays. As one facilitator described, “Each [class] builds upon the next...what it does is we build upon the previous [classes], and we utilize skills such as active listening and forgiving.”

In interviews, many program staff stressed that skills related to coparenting and romantic relationships were similar and that “the tools that we give support both.” While some programs spoke of specific content tailored for each relationship type, many described discussing these relationships “together as one.” When talking about the way one program’s curriculum covers coparenting and romantic relationships, a program director explained, “It’s more general. It’s ...from a perspective of, again, how do I get to more of that collaborative approach?” Another director said that coparenting and romantic relationship components are “distinct, but some of the principles are the same. At the fundamental level, for us, it comes down to healthy communication and healthy role models for children.”

Case management and other one-on-one support services provide an additional means of discussing relationships

Staff from most programs described services or practices that offer one-on-one support as another critical means of supporting fathers' relationships. Specific models of this kind of support varied across programs and ranged from formal program components or requirements to ad-hoc check-ins. Examples include:

- Assigning designated case managers to meet with fathers regularly throughout the program duration
- Making peer mentors available to provide individual support to fathers
- Holding meetings or calls between facilitators and individual fathers outside of group workshop sessions

While addressing healthy relationships was not an explicit goal of these supports, which aimed to provide tailored assistance to fathers based on their individual needs, program staff reported that relationships and relationship challenges were often discussed one-on-one. As one program facilitator said, "We are always communicating with them [fathers] because we meet with them one-on-one. We are talking to them by phone. We're always engaged in trying to improve their relationship with the other parent and with themselves. It's an ongoing thing." Case management and other forms of one-on-one support can therefore serve as a complement to group workshops and a means of identifying and meeting the unique needs of participating fathers. One director described how fathers "participate in the [workshop] sessions but also a lot of one-on-one. Because every father that comes in has a whole set of different issues... So what they don't share in group, they share one-on-one." Ultimately, case managers, facilitators, and/or peer mentors are key resources to fathers, helping to reinforce the concepts addressed in the curriculum, initiate linkages to community services, or problem solve according to a father's individual circumstance:

[T]he reality of it is, in our world, everything starts and stops with case management. So, when you start talking coparenting or we talk about the other array of services we offer from legal services to employment services, the case manager is always involved in all of those different aspects. And so, they are really well-versed at really implementing some of these principles that are within [our curriculum] when meeting with the guys.

As was the case with workshops, case management and one-on-one supports continued virtually by phone or video calls during COVID.

Some programs provide referrals to supplemental relationship services

In addition to healthy relationship programming offered through the program, some program staff spoke of referring fathers to supplemental services to better meet their coparenting and romantic relationship needs. These services included marriage or coparenting counseling and intensive seminars or workshops. In some cases, these supplemental services were provided by the program's partner or an outside organization. In others, they were offered by the program or parent organization. For example, one program director described offering short workshops called mini clinics as "tune-up opportunities" for fathers and their partners or coparents:

Mini clinics are a series of workshops that's designed around the number of challenges that we have seen that exist among couples and coparents. And as a result of that, we had to say, 'Okay, so this is not going to do it all. We need to pull them away. We need to separate them to expose them to ongoing trainings.' The [curriculum] lasts for 90 days, but we provide services for up to a year. So, we use many mini clinics as tune-up opportunities after they completed that program.

Fathers were most often referred to supplemental relationship services when a need for additional support was identified during program intakes or one-on-one sessions. For example, one program director described how during the intake process, a case manager may “start hearing about their parenting partner, maybe some dysfunction that's going on, or even if it's a romantic relationship and the two of you are not on solid ground. What happens is they fill out a referral form [for supplemental services].” Program staff specifically mentioned fathers’ contentious or high-conflict coparenting relationships as a catalyst for referrals to these types of services.

Most programs in the study attempt to engage coparents and families

Finally, program staff described various efforts to include and incorporate coparents, partners, and children in services and activities offered through the fatherhood program. Many staff described coparent and family engagement as an important way to support fathers and their relationships. In most cases, these efforts focused on engaging the coparent, who both staff and fathers typically described as the biological mother(s) of the father’s child(ren). However, staff across programs emphasized that it was rare for a coparent who was no longer in a romantic relationship with a father to engage in formal program activities. Instead, participating coparents tended to be current romantic partners. This aligns with our experience of recruiting coparents into the CHaRMED study: Of the six coparents we successfully enrolled, five were currently in a relationship with the father who completed the fatherhood program.

Engagement of coparents and families occurred in many forms:

- Several of the curricula implemented by participating programs included activities for coparents or partners. Most often, the curricula included designated workshop sessions that coparents and/or partners were invited to attend with fathers that focused on content such as coparenting, communication, conflict resolution, and goal setting. Many of these joint sessions also provided opportunities for practicing skill-building together. This type of coparent/partner engagement is described in greater detail in Theme 5, which explores the benefits and tradeoffs of coparent involvement in programming.
- Staff from one program described offering a “couples” version of the fatherhood program that fathers and their coparents (usually current romantic partners) attended together. Staff reported that this option was not as well attended as the corresponding fathers-only model, in which coparents were only invited to attend designated sessions. However, staff felt it was important to provide coparents the option to “go through the same curriculum from a father’s perspective.”
- Program staff also described engaging both coparents and children through informal events and in-person activities outside of the program. Staff spoke of these events as key touchpoints for fathers, coparents, and/or children, offering space for them to spend quality time with one another. Activities often included game days or outings, such as attending or participating in a sporting event. One program staff member recalled an annual skating party with “parents, coparents...everyone’s invited.”
- Finally, nearly all program staff described holding graduation ceremonies^v for fathers and inviting coparents, partners, and other family members to attend. Staff stressed that the ceremonies provided important opportunities to involve coparents and showcase fathers’ progress during the program. A director from one program spoke of just how meaningful these events can be for fathers and families, saying:

One of the big events is the graduation after the class...The father will reach out many times to the other parent and invite them. And what that does is say, ‘Look, look, I’m not that person you thought I was.’ ... We have a component in this graduation where the fathers give a speech, The Father I Choose to Be. And it puts them in a different light. ... I’ve seen apologies take place at graduations.

^v Graduation ceremonies were not an allowable expense under 2015 RF grant funds. As such, RF programs were required to find alternate funding to support these activities.

► Theme 2. Fathers Engage in Healthy Relationship Content Once They Feel Connected to the Program

“Once [fathers] get there, they’re ready to talk about things that interest them and that they are living through and going through right now.

- Program Facilitator

When asked why they participated in the fatherhood program, few fathers mentioned relationships as a motivation for attendance. Instead, the vast majority spoke of a desire to be better fathers and to improve the lives of their children. Fathers recognized this deep dedication to their children not just in themselves, but in other fathers in the program:

I think, for the most part, any father that goes to [the fatherhood program] is going strictly for the benefit of their kids. I don't think none of us came there to get information about how to be good boyfriends or nothing like that. Everybody was in there as fathers, not boyfriends, not husbands, nothing else, strictly fathers. And that's the only thing that we cared about.

In some cases, fathers reported enrolling in the program to gain access to their children or bolster court cases for custody or visitation rights. As one father explained, “As far as when I started the course initially, yeah, my goal was solely to get custody of my daughter and to look good in court. That was it.” Another commented on how, for an ongoing custody case, “It looks good if you’re in a program like that.”

Although relationships were not initially at the forefront of fathers’ minds, program staff reported that once fathers felt connected to the program, they were engaged and interested in relationship programming. Staff described fathers as “dialed in” and “excited” when discussing healthy relationships in programs. Speaking specifically of fathers’ interest and engagement in relationship-focused services, one program director remarked, “The work is getting them in the door the first time...Once we get them over that initial hurdle of just listening and understanding the value of the services, they were pretty engaged.”

Program staff discussed several strategies for building fathers’ connection to the program early on. For example, staff talked about the need to proactively reach out to fathers, get them in the door, and show them what the program can do. As one program director said, “As soon as we get a referral, we call. And we build a conversation.” For fathers who show initial resistance, particularly those who may be mandated to attend, the recruitment and early engagement periods offer key opportunities to establish trust and demonstrate the overall benefits of the program. One program director credited “[the] initial conversations that we have with folks and really setting expectations of what that journey is going to look like” as a key strategy to reduce initial resistance to the program. Another described using an in-depth intake process with multiple in-person touchpoints before the first workshop session. The program director explained that by the time the fathers show up for the first day of class, they have developed a personal commitment to the program. Ultimately, these early investments lead to greater interest in and dedication to all areas of the program, including healthy relationship content. As one staff member said, “After the first few days... we don't have a large drop-off... The first few days is really just creating a sense of community, making a safe space for people, a brave space for people to talk. And then, they’re all in.”

► Theme 3. Safe Group Spaces Invite Discussions around Healthy Relationships

“ I enjoyed [the group] because I would look at other people’s point of views and seeing other issues, coparenting, dating and how they help each other—I was always looking forward to it.

-Father

Across programs, fathers overwhelmingly spoke of the programs’ welcoming, nonjudgmental atmosphere as a key benefit. For many fathers, the program represented one of the first or only forums where they felt comfortable and empowered to openly discuss their experiences or challenges. One father described how his program “did a really good job with creating that safe space for where I can go and to go and be able to talk about the trauma ... the past experiences and everything.” Fathers often recounted the strong bonds that formed between men, referring to their cohort as a “family” or “brotherhood.” One father shared,

There was a couple of times that I cried. And I’m this guy-- I try to keep my cool like, ‘I’m never going to cry anywhere I go.’ And then, I mean-- and the only reason why I was able to do that is because I felt supported. I felt loved. This is what I would say, like, ‘This is my family outside of my family. This is my second family.’

This safe group space was described by fathers and program staff as critical for open discussions around coparenting and romantic relationships. These conversations often arose organically, with fathers in the group driving the topics as opposed to having been “picked out of the books.” Fathers often reported a sense of relief upon learning that others were facing similar challenges in life and relationships. Fathers especially enjoyed the opportunity to seek guidance from the group about their relationships as well as offer potential solutions when others in the group were facing relationship challenges. One father recalled,

It’s helpful to hear other fathers’ takes on their relationships and how they view their significant others or their parenting styles ... And that’s something that is good for us to know about each other because then we can help one another in those areas instead of always having to have our guard up.

Fathers also recognized the essential role program staff played in creating and maintaining a space conducive to these conversations. As discussed in Theme 2, this intentional process of creating a welcoming environment starts early on for program staff. Fathers described how facilitators often shared personal stories, especially those related to fatherhood or relationships, to help put the group at ease. One father explained, “[The facilitator] was able to create the comfort because he was very forthcoming about his own mistakes in life, and he was very open and blunt. I mean, the guy would just lay it out there, and he had no shame about it.” Another said of his facilitator,

He did a fabulous job of creating an environment where we’re all here, we’re all here for similar reasons, we’re all here to get better. Let’s use our experiences. Let’s be brothers in this and let’s just be real and open with each other... And you could be completely open, and nobody’s going to think bad about you in any way.

Program directors stressed the important role of facilitators, who were often fathers themselves, and made deliberate efforts during the hiring process to identify those who would foster a safe space for fathers. Program directors described an explicit focus on hiring facilitators who demonstrated empathy and vulnerability to create connections with fathers. Some directors also felt that it can be helpful for facilitators to have similar lived experiences as fathers. However, both program directors and facilitators emphasized that there are many ways a facilitator can have shared experiences—as a father, as someone

who has been in a coparenting or romantic relationship, as someone previously involved with the criminal justice system, etc. What both program directors and facilitators felt was most important is a facilitator's willingness to share these personal stories and lessons learned. One program director said,

[W]hat we recognize as an important piece of the puzzle is our facilitators being transparent and sharing their thing. That really kind of opens things up. So in the end, Dad will most oftentimes open up and be transparent, but it can take a while. But that's when the facilitation really kind of steps in and guides the conversation and truly being transparent about their experiences...Transparency is key.

One drawback to the remote programming offered during COVID was the difficulty in creating a sense of camaraderie during group sessions. Program staff often said that the in-person atmosphere is altered when online. As one facilitator said of remote programming, "It's not something that we really prefer to do because we like to create—I mean, to be in person. It's totally different. It's definitely different to be there in person." Another said that fathers who participated in person before switching to a fully remote environment reported that the greatest benefit to the former was being able to make strong connections.

Despite the challenges of remote programming, both facilitators and fathers still felt that they were able to create a sense of community virtually. As one father put it, "The only thing that changed is we're not in person. But it's still good. It's still good talk." A facilitator from one program described joining virtual sessions early, dinner in hand, to allow fathers time "to come and sit and talk by Zoom." One father who completed a remote program spoke specifically of the way his facilitator's openness was successful in drawing out participation:

There's this natural instinct to, when you're on a Zoom meeting, just to kind of check out. I mean, if you're on a laptop, all you got to do really is open another tab...But no, he just really did a great job of keeping everybody checked in and just creating that environment ... And I mean, people that, for the first couple weeks, didn't speak unless they had to were becoming so much more interactive within the course. ...I think a lot of it-- he was able to create the comfort because he was very forthcoming about his own mistakes in life, and he was very open and blunt....So he does a good job of building that rapport initially, and then it gets really real.

► Theme 4. Staff and Participants view Healthy Relationship Content as Relevant and Useful for Fathers' Coparenting Relationships

“ *I opened my eyes to, obviously, new knowledge...on coparenting, on being a parent, on relationships. I got to say, there was a lot of valuable information through the course that I definitely didn't expect to take away, but I did.*

-Father

Although programs addressed both coparenting and romantic relationships, staff across programs expressed that coparenting relationships was a more salient and pressing issue than romantic relationships for fathers. In general, many staff attributed this to the fact that while all fathers were in coparenting relationships, only some were also in romantic relationships. Speaking about coparenting, one facilitator said, "It's a topic [the fathers] bring up almost every class. Because that's their problem—they're not getting along with their coparents." Another program director echoed this, saying:

I think we lean heavier into the coparenting aspect, for sure. ... When we start getting into personal romance, it gets a little more difficult. If we were to choose, we're going to give them skills and talk about how to coparent effectively and then control your emotions, handle your conflicts, those types of things....Most of our guys are not romantic with their coparents, we're finding.

Interviews with fathers supported the notion that romantic relationships were not the priority topic for many fathers. As one father recalled, “Yeah, we did kind of [talk about] romantic relationships, but I wasn't really romantically involved at that time in my life, so I didn't have much going on.” Despite nearly two thirds of the fathers in our sample reporting being in a romantic relationship, interviewees spent more time discussing their coparenting relationships and the ways in which the programs affected them. In particular, fathers discussed more acute and significant challenges in their coparenting relationships compared to their romantic relationships. For example, many fathers described finding it difficult to communicate with their coparents without arguments or confrontation. Others reported feeling unprepared to approach or initiate important conversations. As one father explained, “There were plenty of times where she would ask stuff, and I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to talk to the mother of my child because there were so many times where I was frustrated, and I just didn't know what to say. So, I would just bottle everything up.”

Fathers reported learning skills in the programs to help them better address some of these challenges. In interviews, fathers spoke often about skills and techniques related to communication, such as active listening and awareness of non-verbal cues. One father eagerly recounted having learned about the concept of emotion coaching, describing it as “really having the empathy to take myself out of the situation, and no matter what the other parent's feeling or what my kid is feeling, I have to be supportive of that.” Another discussed the importance of understanding “trigger points” to effectively respond to his coparent:

Trigger points is huge...one of the topics about stress and knowing when you're getting stressed out and what's happening to cause it was your trigger points and your cues with your ex. So recognize the verbiage that your ex is using, recognize style of communication, "Is it really aggressive? Are we communicating effectively? Are we about to start arguing? Is the person upset? Should I wait to have this conversation on a different day so that it won't upset the kids?" Things along that line.

In many cases, fathers indicated that they had been able to put certain learned skills into practice. Some saw improvements in their relationships as a result, which fathers most often spoke of in the context of coparenting relationships. As one father recounted,

[The fatherhood program] definitely helped open that door with my [child's mother] because she's seen that I was attempting. So before, I didn't even know how to approach the situation with it and every time I attempted I would just get mad and shut down and it would turn into a huge fight. So, [the fatherhood program] kind of helped me to develop the skills to re-approach the situation the proper way and not in such a negative way.

A few coparents also noted positive changes in their coparenting relationships with fathers who participated in the programs. One coparent said of her husband, “So now, after he took that program, we really coparent well together. We validate feelings. We sound it off—do bad guys, do the good guys sometimes. We just switch back and forth sometimes. But I feel like we have a real good vibe about it.” Another coparent described a shift in her coparenting relationship after she had attended several fatherhood program sessions with the father, explaining,

We communicated before, but we weren't really opening up. You know what I'm saying? We were hearing but without hearing. And it was causing—there was a lot of things getting

missed or misunderstood or stuff like that. And by taking the [fatherhood program] course, we learned that we have to efficiently listen to each other so we can be open to listen to the children.

Some program staff stressed that while many fathers were eager to discuss coparenting, some fathers did display resistance to the topic. This was most often attributed to fathers being in highly contentious relationships with coparents. In these cases, both program directors and facilitators spoke of encouraging fathers' engagement by highlighting the benefits of positive coparenting relationships for children. As described in Theme 2, program staff stressed that a key motivator for program participation was fathers' desire to strengthen their relationships with their children. One facilitator said, "One truth I know from all of this is all of these fathers that we dealt with want to take care of their children, regardless of the circumstances, regardless of the numbers of partners, regardless of the lack of resources, regardless of whatever." Fathers appeared to appreciate that program staff discussed coparenting in the context of improving the lives and wellbeing of their children. As one father recalled,

They did really focus on the kid. And by focusing on the child that's involved in the situation, or the children involved in the situation, it's almost a linear path to one desired outcome in coparenting, which is if you think of the kid, you act for the kid. It creates a mentality of how you communicate with the coparent.

► Theme 5. Meaningful Engagement of Coparents in Relationship Programming is Seen as Beneficial but with Important Tradeoffs and Logistical Challenges

“ You know, it'd be nice to have your partners there to go over whatever it is that you're working on in that week.

-Father, commenting on a benefit of engaging coparents in fatherhood program

“ I feel like the way the discussions went, I really enjoyed them. I could give [other fathers] my opinion without being worried...Don't take that away from me.

-Father, commenting on what is lost by engaging coparents in fatherhood program

As described in Theme 1, most programs that participated in the study engaged coparents in some capacity. However, when asked about this engagement, a tension emerged between the value of including coparents in core programming and the difficulties and downsides of doing so. Fathers, coparents, and program staff tended to speak of coparent engagement as an ideal but challenging practice.

Many fathers were enthusiastic about the advantages of bringing fathers and coparents together. Some spoke of appreciating the opportunity to observe how peers interacted with their coparents. One father described this as a "life-changing experience because you see how different parents and stuff act towards each other, how they talk to each other and everything." He went on to explain how even negative interactions he witnessed between other fathers and their coparents were instructive, and reflected that "you don't want to talk down to one and one talk down about the other...you have to pull the kids back and forth, they don't know which way to go. They'll be confused and everything."

Fathers and coparents also expressed an eagerness to build an understanding of the other's perspective and practice healthy communication skills. One coparent who had not been engaged in her partner's program felt that this was a missed opportunity: "I just feel like it's a good idea to at least... just to sit in and listen to the guy's point of view. Because their point of view may be different than the woman's point of view. So, they can kind of put it together and see where they're both coming from." Program staff explained that inviting coparents to designated workshop sessions can create a neutral space for partners and/or coparents to practice communication skills. Staff believed that when both parents successfully integrate the programs' teachings, it can lead to a better understanding of how the parents can support each other:

So, it's helpful for [a coparent] to hear the information while he's hearing it so that she can understand. Because if they come from the same dynamics, oftentimes some of the same problems, the same characteristics, are manifested in that relationship. And we've seen it work out very well when they're getting the same information.

Despite an acknowledgement that coparent involvement in the program holds value, most fathers expressed concerns that the presence of coparents had significant implications for the safe group space that so many fathers cherished. Specifically, fathers felt that inviting coparents to attend workshop sessions threatened the group dynamic, making it difficult to have open and honest discussions. Fathers also overwhelmingly felt that coparents' presence can detract from feelings of a shared experience. For example, struggles around custody and visitation were particular issues that fathers did not think coparents could understand. As one father said, "The other side don't understand what we go through. My daughter's mom will never know what it's like [for me to be kept from my child] ... But almost every dad in there had their child kept from them for some period of time."

Most program staff echoed fathers' concerns about this tradeoff and stressed the value of maintaining a fathers-only space. One director explained that their program does not involve coparents because "it's a closed group. I mean, because part of being able to heal—I use that word—is that closed group. There's a trust factor there." In explaining why they don't invite coparents to workshop classes, another facilitator said, "[W]e try real hard to develop the safe space where they can talk freely about anything ... then if you bring the other partners in it, it changes the whole dynamic of the class."

Staff also spoke about specific logistical challenges they faced to successfully engaging coparents in their program. As discussed further in Theme 6, some staff noted strained or "fractured" relationships between coparents as a barrier. In many cases, staff felt that despite efforts to reach out to coparents, many were reluctant to participate in a program with fathers with whom they were no longer in romantic relationships. One program that aimed to engage coparents in fatherhood program sessions reported no coparents participating at the time of the interview due to "a lot of hostility between a lot of parents now." Further, some staff noted that inviting coparents who are not on good terms with fathers may lead to conflict during the workshop sessions, which they felt was best to avoid.

Some program staff described strategies for involving coparents while addressing fathers' concerns and minimizing logistical challenges. One program has had success inviting coparents to attend two specific program sessions with the fathers. During those sessions, a male facilitator takes the fathers into one room while a female facilitator takes coparents (usually romantic partners) into a different room. As a facilitator for that program related, "This is [a] time for the fathers to be able to practice what they have learned ... and also to help the mother of the child to have another perspective." In one program that operates in a prison, facilitators deliver program materials to coparents by mail. The facilitator explained, "We give our participants opportunities for us to send that curriculum home to their coparent. And then they have ways that they then study together. And a lot of our guys take advantage of those opportunities." One father who completed the program felt that this approach was a good way to allow coparents to receive important program content without infringing on fathers' space, saying "Let mom and dad do their own thing. Provide the mom, or the coparent, with their own material, and let them deal with it. But as far as the classroom setting goes...I think it should be just the fathers."

► Theme 6: Fathers See Access to Children as a Key Challenge in their Lives, which is Complicated by Challenging Coparenting Relationships and Legal and Social Systems

“ I don't even get to coparent, that's what I'm saying. I go to court next month, and I don't even, haven't even seen my kids.

-Father

“ Many of the guys lost their opportunity completely because their coparenting relationship is not very good with the mom. So, there's probably more happening between mom and dad of the kids, lots of stress over their kid. And so, when you're talking to somebody who's very and very volatile, and they've been traumatized by the events of their life and also traumatized by the systemic involvement and the loss of their children, hopefully temporarily. They're just very volatile. And so, nothing can upset their service plan progress more than not being able to see their kids.

-Program director

“ [W]hen you take somebody's kids, it really affects everything in your life, your relationship, your parenting, your mental [health].... It impacts the coparenting and relationship and everything else, and it's in a negative way.

-Coparent

Across programs, fathers overwhelmingly spoke about the ways in which legal and social systems affect their ability to see and maintain consistent, healthy relationships with their children. Both fathers and program staff described the difficult negotiations around child access that can occur within systems such as family courts and Child Protective Services (CPS). In many cases, fathers' challenges with systems were discussed in the context of coparenting relationships. These relationships were described as fractured or beyond repair by both fathers and program staff, demonstrating how the interplay between legal and social systems and coparent relationships can influence fathers' relationships with their children.

Fathers frequently reported being unable to be involved in their children's lives despite desiring more engagement. They spoke of needing “to go through CPS” to see their children or “waiting for the court to grant me my parenting time back,” emphasizing the important role these systems play in facilitating (and often prohibiting) fathers' access to their children. This limited access was often due to legal requirements and conditions, such as the need for fathers to secure steady housing and income prior to visitation as part of their custody agreements. However, many fathers described facing difficulties in securing stable housing or employment, particularly when dealing with a history of incarceration, substance abuse, or mental health issues. As one facilitator explained, “If you're living in your car, you're not going to get your kids back. CPS is not going to let you keep your kids if you're working at Walmart, and you're getting minimum wage.”

Both fathers and staff spoke pointedly about biases and stigma built into these systems, and the ways in which they affect fathers in the courtroom and at home. Fathers described a “mother-based society,” where “mothers have more rights than fathers.” Many also shared experiences feeling that caseworkers or courts largely side with mothers. For example, one father described a situation in which he “called CPS to see my kids, and CPS said that it was [the mother's] decision even though she's in prison.” Program staff echoed these concerns and often spoke of the ways in which larger societal beliefs can handicap fathers:

I think we as society are a little bit more judgmental about fathers, or fathers' lack of involvement, for a lot of different reasons, some valid, some definitely not valid. And so those type of things, I think, obviously play into the coparenting round because mom is the gatekeeper, and if it's a marathon, she's already two laps ahead of the father. And so, in the way things are set up, fathers are always trying to catch up or prove themselves.

Fathers and program staff saw the nature and quality of fathers' coparenting relationships as inextricably linked to their ability to access their children, both within and outside of the legal context. Many fathers described how already contentious coparenting relationships can lead to emotionally taxing custody battles and parental gatekeeping. Some fathers spoke of instances where coparents would limit their ability to see their children for long periods of time due to ongoing relationship issues. One father related, "More so, for me, what being a father [is] more so about having to deal with the other person. And what I mean by that, at some point, she weaponized the child to—like used him against me to hurt me. So then, I'm not in his life." Another said, "The most challenging thing I've had to deal with since becoming a father is the relationship with my daughter's mom...because we got into an argument, and I haven't seen my daughter since." Program staff emphasized the stress experienced by fathers facing access and visitation issues. One facilitator described how custody battles placed "a lot of stress and strain on the relationship," further compounding existing challenges in the coparenting relationship.

Despite acknowledging the importance of cooperative coparenting relationships in facilitating their involvement with their children, some fathers expressed a sense of hopelessness around mending these relationships. Fathers discussed the way some programs worked to support them in managing particularly contentious relationships, including recommending several mobile applications (apps). Apps such as Appclose or Family Wizard are specifically designed to document and monitor parenting communication and provide a platform for managing custody and visitation schedules. Several fathers credited these apps with reducing the amount of conflict in their coparenting relationships. One father said that using an app for communication with his coparent has been a "huge positive." He went on to explain that keeping all communication online "where a judge or a lawyer or a counselor or somebody can see it...eliminates a lot of drama."



Program staff often spoke of the crucial role both formal and informal supports can play in helping fathers navigate the interplay between coparents and legal and social systems. Specifically, they discussed case managers offering guidance and connecting fathers to organizations that could provide additional information on managing these negotiations. More often, they underscored the importance of informal interactions in helping fathers feel supported. For example, staff often described attending court dates or implementing "wellness checks," where facilitators check in on how fathers are doing and hear about court hearings. One staff person noted, "I tell our facilitators, 'You are not just a facilitator. You are someone who's showing care and concern for [the fathers].'" Fathers expressed appreciation for supportive and communicative facilitators who helped them feel like "nobody is up there by themselves." As one father said of the way staff checked in on him, "It made me feel like someone really cared and someone was really there to help."

Discussion and Considerations

The fathers, coparents, and program staff interviewed as part of our study provided important insights into the ways in which fatherhood programs support, or could better support, fathers' coparenting and romantic relationships. Program staff described the many ways their program worked to create a space in which fathers felt open to workshop content and conversations around relationships. Specific engagement and delivery strategies—such as intentionally engaging fathers before the start of the program, delivering programming through a cohort-based model, and ensuring the presence of caring and attentive facilitators—seemed to resonate deeply with fathers. Ultimately, many fathers reported learning and using communication and problem-solving techniques in their relationships despite not originally joining the program with the goal of improving them, demonstrating the potential for fatherhood programs to effectively deliver relationship programming within the context of a broader focus on economic self-sufficiency, positive parenting practices, and engagement with children.

Although fatherhood programs aim to address both coparenting and romantic relationships, coparenting emerged as the relationship type that fathers were more interested in discussing and learning to navigate. As such, coparenting was a key focus of healthy relationship programming. Both fathers and staff spoke of coparenting discussions emerging organically in workshops and other services, indicating fathers' interest in this topic. Additionally, despite the majority of fathers reporting being in a romantic relationship while participating in a fatherhood program (e.g., married, cohabitating, or in a relationship but not married or cohabitating), fathers tended to discuss relationship challenges and program lessons through the lens of coparenting. This desire for skills to support their coparenting relationships over their romantic relationships among fathers in RF programs has been noted in previous research.¹⁶ However, the skills that fathers tended to remember and discussed using—such as healthy communication and problem-solving techniques—were described by staff in our study as being relevant for all types of relationships. There is reason, therefore, to believe that many fathers may also apply these key skills to current or future romantic relationships. This points to the potential for fatherhood programs to benefit both coparenting and romantic relationships by focusing on these core skills. In addition, the curricula reviewed for this study provide workshop-based strategies for building fathers' relationship skills in ways that can benefit all relationships. Most curricula that engage partners were developed for use with either coparents or romantic partners and can be tailored depending on fathers' relationship status.

The difficulties that programs in our sample faced in including coparents in programming—particularly in cases where the coparenting relationship was strained—speaks to the many challenges inherent to coparent engagement in fatherhood programs, as has been documented in other studies.²⁰ In our study, staff reported that they had the greatest success in involving coparents who were current romantic partners of the fathers in their programs, and that they struggled to effectively reach non-romantic partners. This was reflected in our own efforts to recruit coparents for study interviews: despite extensive recruitment efforts, we were only able to interview six coparents, five of whom were in a romantic relationship with the study father. Moreover, though fathers and staff agreed that there are benefits to coparent involvement in programming, they are split around how to best do so without disrupting the fatherhood program space. While not all fatherhood programs are equipped to engage coparents in programming—and not all fathers in a program may be at a stage where involving coparents may be successful or effective—there is a distinct lack of guidance for programs that do desire this engagement. Future research may inform these efforts by testing specific strategies in fatherhood program settings.

Finally, our findings highlight how a range of external factors can affect fathers' relationships with coparents and engagement with their children, including societal views of fathers and fatherhood and perceived biases in social and legal systems. For example, parenting is often seen as a mother-dominated domain, as evidenced by systems and policies that tend to favor mothers over fathers as primary caregivers.²¹ Interviews revealed the persistent challenges fathers face in navigating the intersection of coparenting relationships and legal systems, as well as the stress this creates for them. These findings drive

home the need for programs to provide some fathers with support that extends beyond relationship skills, such as assistance in navigating or self-advocating within legal and social systems.

It is important to consider the findings within the context of study limitations. Much of what has been presented throughout the report reflects the perspectives of fathers and fatherhood program staff. While we have incorporated the views of coparents where applicable, the small sample size does not allow for a comprehensive understanding of coparent perspectives, particularly around issues related to access and visitation. It is also possible that our sampling approach, in which we asked program directors and staff to connect us to participants for interviews, may have limited or biased the perspectives we heard. As a final note, many staff emphasized the significant changes that had been made to programming due to COVID. While our study did not aim to examine fatherhood programs in the context of COVID, we must recognize that our results were ultimately shaped by this unique moment in time.

Despite these limitations, we believe our findings provide insight into the ways in which fatherhood programs' relationship programming can address the needs of fathers and their families. We offer the following considerations for future practice and research:

Considerations for Future Practice

- **Focus on relationship skills that are applicable across different types of relationships.** While fathers often indicated a greater interest in content focused on coparenting, staff noted that many key skills can be applied to both coparenting and romantic relationships. For example, skills related to communication and problem-solving not only address coparenting challenges but can also benefit current or future romantic relationships. Fatherhood programs seeking to ensure content is relevant for all relationship types should prioritize curricula that focus on such broad, transferable skills.
- **Consider four key strategies to promote father engagement in content related to healthy relationships.** Program staff in our study stressed the need to build comfort and camaraderie among fathers before discussing relationships. Fatherhood programs may want to consider using the following strategies to promote father engagement in healthy relationship content:
 - **Structure programs using a cohort-based model.** While fatherhood programs typically deliver workshops either through integrated cohorts or open-entry workshops,¹² all programs in this study employed a cohort model. This gradual, group-based format seemed particularly well-suited for addressing relationship content, as it allowed fathers to steadily get to know one another and establish bonds that promote openness to discussions around relationships.
 - **Hire staff willing to be open and vulnerable about lived experiences.** Both fathers and program staff recognized the crucial role facilitators played in creating the safe space conducive to open discussions. Fathers spoke specifically about the way facilitators modeled vulnerability and transparency by sharing personal stories, even when these stories and experiences differed from those of fathers in the room. Program directors may want to seek out staff with strong skills in practicing and cultivating this openness.
 - **Foster an early commitment to the program.** Fathers seemed eager to engage in discussions on relationships once they felt invested in the program as a whole. Staff spoke of using an intensive and father-focused recruitment and engagement process to strengthen fathers' investment in the entire program. The process often involved multiple touchpoints and laid a foundation for a trusting relationship between fathers and staff.
 - **Recognize children as a key motivator for fathers, especially when discussing coparenting relationships.** Fathers overwhelmingly indicated that they completed the fatherhood programs

for the sake of their children. Research supports this idea that children are a motivating factor for participation in fatherhood programs.^{22,23} While relationships were not what initially drew fathers to the program, fathers described coming to appreciate the value of this content—especially coparenting content—when they clearly understood the benefits of healthy relationships for their children. Fatherhood programs seeking to ensure that fathers are open to relationship programming can frame coparenting discussions around children.

- **Consider models of coparent engagement that protect the fathers-only space.** Interviews revealed a need to balance the value of involving coparents in programming while respecting a space reserved just for fathers. Program staff also spoke of the difficulties inherent to engaging coparents in a meaningful way, given the varied relationships fathers may have with their coparents in a given cohort. Programs that struggle with these hurdles may want to consider providing opportunities for coparents to receive the same (or similar) relationship content as fathers while maintaining a fathers-only space. Examples of specific strategies from our study sample include:
 - **Mail or email relationship content to coparents of participating fathers.** Coparents can either review the content independently or discuss the content together with the father.
 - **Invite coparents to attend designated workshop sessions.** Program facilitators can deliver the same (or similar) relationship content to each group, and each group can practice skill-building amongst themselves.
 - **Refer interested coparents to services outside of the fatherhood program.** If fatherhood programs do not or cannot engage coparents in programming, staff can refer interested coparents to alternate services that offer similar content such as motherhood programs, coparenting workshops, or seminars.
- **Provide supports for fathers navigating contentious coparenting relationships and systemic challenges.** Fathers overwhelmingly spoke of difficult coparenting relationships and legal and social systems as persistent stressors in their lives. It is critical that fatherhood programs seek to address the systemic, layered challenges that fathers face in their lives and relationships. Fathers in our study appreciated the support of program staff as they navigated these challenging circumstances and particularly valued the following approaches:
 - **Create opportunities for one-on-one check-ins outside of workshops sessions.** Fathers and facilitators spoke specifically about the importance of providing both emotional and logistic support in the weeks surrounding family court or custody cases.
 - **Provide access to tools to assist with communication, including mobile apps.** Mobile apps, such as Appclose or Family Wizard, can be used to document and monitor parenting communication.
- **Recognize that fatherhood programs play an important role in supporting fathers' healthy relationships even when coparents are not or cannot be engaged.** Not all fatherhood programs engage coparents, and as we found, not all coparenting relationships are at a stage where they can be supported. In these instances, fatherhood programs can still focus on teaching fathers valuable relationship skills that can be applied to all relationships.

Considerations for Future Research

- **Identify effective strategies for engaging coparents.** Some fathers and program staff in this study believed that it is important for coparents to receive the same type of healthy relationship content as fathers. However, it remains unclear how to effectively engage coparents, particularly when the

coparenting relationship is severely strained. In general, programs were most successful at engaging the coparents in romantic relationships with fathers. More effective strategies for including coparents not currently involved with fathers in both research studies and practice are needed.

- **Evaluate how different delivery approaches to engaging coparents improves coparenting outcomes and whether there are any unintended effects of coparent engagement.** While research suggests that engaging coparents in relationship services provided by fatherhood programs may improve coparenting outcomes, it remains unclear whether certain approaches to coparent engagement are more effective than others at achieving these positive coparenting outcomes.²⁴ Programs currently use a variety of approaches to engage coparents, such as inviting coparents to attend certain sessions or creating a separate version of the program specifically for couples. In addition, research should consider whether there are unintended consequences of engaging coparents, such as changes in fathers' attendance or engagement in the program or increased conflict between some coparents.
- **Determine approaches that best support fathers with severely strained coparenting relationships.** Many of the fathers and program staff in this study felt it particularly important for programs to support fathers' coparenting relationships. However, research is needed to identify the approaches that would most effectively support fathers who have severely strained coparenting relationships, including those with legal barriers that limit their access to their children. This research could consider the effectiveness of strategies used to help fathers manage the coparenting relationship – like documenting all interactions between coparents – as well as strategies to support fathers who aim to repair that strained relationship.



Appendices

Appendix A: Curricula Used by Fatherhood Programs Participating in the CHaRMED Study to Address Healthy Relationships

The curricula reviewed in the following table are classified as General Fatherhood/Parenting Education Curricula or Relationship Education Curricula. Data sources for the review include publicly available sources such as curriculum developer websites, curriculum documents provided by participating programs when available, and interviews with program facilitators and directors. Select fatherhood program staff and curriculum developers also reviewed information pertaining to their respective curricula for accuracy.

General Fatherhood/Parenting Education Curricula				
24/7 DAD				
This curriculum is designed to support the growth and development of fathers and children as compassionate people who treat themselves and others with respect and dignity. There are two versions of the curriculum: A.M. and P.M. 24/7 A.M. focuses on foundational fathering topics, including family history, what it means to be a man, showing and handling feelings, men’s health, etc. 24/7 P.M. covers more advanced fathering topics, such as boyhood to manhood, family ties, power and control, etc. This version is recommended for those who already have completed 24/7 A.M.				
Length	Target population	Curriculum objectives	Description of coparenting/romantic relationship content	Coparent involvement
12, 2-hour sessions each in A.M. and P.M versions, plus two optional sessions per version	All fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase pro-fathering knowledge, skills, and attitudes• Increase fathers’ frequency of healthy interaction with children• Increase fathers’ healthy interactions with the mother of the fathers’ children• Decrease social, emotional, and physical ills of children	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The A.M. version includes a module titled “Fathering Family Roles,” which emphasizes how to be a caring and loving father and partner and the benefits of marriage.• The P.M. version includes a module titled, “The Sex, Love, and Relationships,” which covers what it means to have a healthy adult relationship, how relationships may affect children, and ways to improve sexual self-worth and adult relationships.• The “Improving My Communication Skills” module does not explicitly focus on romantic or coparenting relationships, but it walks fathers through ways to handle criticism and confrontation, and build negotiation, problem solving, and decision-making skills.	Both the A.M. and P.M. versions conclude with two optional two-hour sessions where coparents or partners attend with fathers to discuss ways the father, the couple, and the family have changed, and ways that the couple can recognize if there are similarities or differences in their approach to romantic relationships and parenting styles. Fathers and coparents also establish goals for their relationship and family.

General Fatherhood/Parenting Education Curricula

24/7 DAD (with adaptations for Native fathers)*

One of the fatherhood programs in our study adapted the 24/7 DAD curriculum for their site. The adaptations include tailoring eight out of the 24 hours to Native fathers and including a focus on the mental and spiritual aspects of how they make choices. In this adaptation, the fatherhood program did not change the content of the curricula but instead supplemented the content with more relevant material for Native fathers.

Length	Target population	Curriculum objectives	Description of coparenting/ romantic relationship content	Coparent involvement
24 hours	Native Fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reinforcing 24/7 Dads curriculum objectives with multimedia presentations Navigation of social services within different counties in the state 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The adapted version integrates the Native American concept of balance or circle of life, or harmony into all content (can be applied to a father or coparent, etc.). 	The curriculum concludes with two optional two-hour sessions where coparents or partners attend with fathers to discuss ways the father, the couple, and the family have changed, and ways that the couple can recognize if there are similarities or differences in their approach to romantic relationships and parenting styles. Fathers and coparents also establish goals for their relationship and family.

General Fatherhood/Parenting Education Curricula

Dads For Life

The curriculum has four modules: (1) Real Men are Dads for Life; (2) Dads: Parenting for Life; (3) Dads Changing Across Life; and (4) Commit to Being a Dad for Life. Fathers learn the importance of their role in children's lives as well as how to communicate with their children and partner (or ex-partner). Additionally, the curriculum provides skills to help fathers understand how to coparent more effectively. The curriculum was designed to be flexible so that facilitators can address fathers in diverse settings and relationships. The overall goals of this program are: (1) To increase the number of children who are influenced by caring, competent, and committed fathers, and (2) For fathers to increase the amount and quality of their involvement in the lives of their children

Length	Target population	Curriculum objectives	Description of coparenting/romantic relationship content	Coparent involvement
4, 2-hour sessions, but customizable to other session lengths (e.g., 8, 1-hour sessions)	Noncustodial, recently divorced fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define the importance and variety of roles a father fills for his children Implement skills that will increase the effectiveness of parenting roles, regardless of relationship status (e.g., resident and nonresident fathers) Apply strategies to increase the quality and closeness of family relationships, such as father to child or partner to partner (if appropriate) Create resilience through problem solving, conflict resolution, and adaptability to changing situations in fatherhood 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Several modules of the curriculum focus on building a strong parent-to-parent relationship and learning how to effectively communicate with romantic partners and coparents. As part of building healthy romantic and coparent relationships, fathers learn how to build three skills for building healthy families: speaking, listening, and cooperating. The curriculum also discusses fathering in specific family contexts: divorced (separated) coparents, single parents with no coparent, stepfamilies, deployed military, or incarceration. The curriculum can be adapted to support father relationships with either the coparent or their romantic partners – depending on the father's needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This curriculum does not engage coparents.

General Fatherhood/Parenting Education Curricula

Family Works*

This curriculum is designed to supplement other fatherhood curricula and includes experiences of fathers and families with justice system involvement. The curriculum helps fathers understand how to build relationships with their family as well as with themselves and their community. It also covers topics on how to work with their parole or probation officer and how to ensure a positive environment for children to decrease the likelihood of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

Length	Target population	Curriculum objectives	Description of coparenting/romantic relationship content	Coparent involvement
Not specified	Fathers who have experienced justice system involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve relationships with one's family and community • Maintain a positive relationship with parole or probation officer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Although this curriculum does not specifically address coparenting or romantic relationships, it includes topics related to ACEs and the effects of fathers' early childhood trauma on their current relationships with their children and partners and/or coparents. Fathers also discuss how their behaviors impact their children. For example, they learn the importance of modeling healthy communication in front of children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This curriculum does not engage coparents.

General Fatherhood/Parenting Education Curricula

Man 2 Man*

This curriculum is based off the Nurturing Fathers curriculum and takes a holistic approach to helping men become the best fathers they can be.

Length	Target population	Curriculum objectives	Description of coparenting/romantic relationship content	Coparent involvement
24 weeks	All fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build fathers' relationship skills to improve the lives of fathers and their children • Improve coparenting skills and learn how to have a positive role in children's lives • Learn how to manage physical/mental health to model healthy behaviors for children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fathers spend 6 weeks on healthy relationships, and 6 weeks on parenting/ coparenting. • In the healthy relationships component, men draw on their personal histories and build relationship skills that can improve life for their children and themselves. • In the parenting/ coparenting sections, fathers learn how to coparent and have positive roles in children's lives. They learn topics ranging from how to provide structure and stability to establishing paternity and visitation rights. • Along with classes, fathers create a "one-man plan" that lays out their goals (which may include relationship goals) as well as a road map for achieving those goals. They also engage in peer group sessions with other fathers in the program. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coparents (who are often current romantic partners) are invited to sessions in the healthy relationships component of the curriculum. • Coparents are asked to participate in a session where they talk about concepts from John Gray's <i>Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus</i>. Couples are asked to role-play real life scenarios and practice communication. • Programs can encourage parents to participate in other sessions.

General Fatherhood/Parenting Education Curricula

Nurturing Fathers

This curriculum is designed to empower fathers to increase their commitment and responsibility to their children as well as to their spouse/coparent . The overall goal of the program is to improve family relationships, as well as adult and child well-being. Fathers understand that they have the choice to relearn and reshape fathering and learn nurturing fathering practices to achieve their goals.

Length	Target population	Curriculum objectives	Description of coparenting/romantic relationship content	Coparent involvement
13, 2.5-hour sessions	All fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve parent attitudes • Develop parenting skills • Increase positive self-concept and self-esteem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coparenting is mainly discussed during Week 10. Four objectives are covered during Week 10: 1) identify the elements of successful teamwork, 2) learn and practice skills related to negotiation, conflict resolution, and problem solving, 3) practice a method for dividing household and parenting tasks, and 4) discuss special circumstances in fathering (divorce, step-fathering, single-fathering, etc.). • Apart from Week 10, elements of healthy relationships are discussed in Week 4 and Week 5. In Week 4, fathers define the nurturing characteristics that are shared by both fathers/males and mothers/females and identify differences in parenting practices. In Week 5, fathers differentiate between nurturing and non-nurturing fathering practices and understand the differences between “power-over” and “power-to” and how they affect fathers’ relationships with their children and coparents/ spouses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This curriculum does not engage coparents.

General Fatherhood/Parenting Education Curricula

Parenting Inside Out – Prison 60

This curriculum is an evidence-based, cognitive-behavioral parent management skills training program created for parents currently involved in the justice system. This curriculum was created through a six-year collaboration of scientists, policymakers, practitioners, and instructional designers. The information in the curriculum was informed by knowledge derived from research and practice. There are four versions : prison 60, prison 90, jail, and community. The Prison 60 version of the curriculum covers 11 topics in 60 hours. Even though parenting is the primary focus of this curriculum, there is also a section on romantic relationships.

Length	Target population	Curriculum objectives	Description of coparenting/romantic relationship content	Coparent involvement
30, 2-hour sessions taught over 10 weeks (3 classes/week) or over 14 weeks (2 classes/week)	Parents currently involved in the justice system, especially those with longer sentences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improve parents' motivation, knowledge, and skills to understand child development and behaviors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Romantic relationships are the focus of Topic 2, titled “Communication and Problem Solving.” During this session, fathers learn about effective speaking, learning, and problem-solving skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This curriculum does not engage coparents.

General Fatherhood/Parenting Education Curricula

Strengthening Families

This curriculum is an evidence-based training program that addresses parenting skills, children's social skills, and family life skills. It is specifically designed for families experiencing risk factors such as substance use and involves the whole family, not just parents and children alone. The curriculum covers parent training, children's skills training, and family life skills training over 14, two-hour sessions. The curriculum has individual sessions for children and parents during the first hour, and then a joint session for both parents and children to spend time as a family and engage in structured activities. The curriculum aims to help children learn life and refusal skills, increase protective factors, and reduce the risk of substance abuse. It also focuses on developing parenting skills, which help parents in their current and future relationships with their children and partners.

Length	Target population	Curriculum objectives	Description of coparenting/romantic relationship content	Coparent involvement
14, two-hour weekly sessions	<p>Families experiencing risk factors such as substance use</p> <p>Culturally adapted for African American families, Asian/Pacific Islanders, Hispanic and American Indian families, rural families, and families with early teens</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become a nurturing, loving parent • Improve parent/child attachment and family relations, communication, and organization • Improve adults' parenting skills, reduce excessive punishment or lax discipline and improvements in parenting self-efficacy • Enhance children's protective and resilience factors by improving children's social and life skills, peer resistance, and communication skills, and decrease intention to use alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The curriculum focuses on providing education and improving the skills of parents in three foundational areas of relationships: expectations, communication, and conflict resolution. • The curriculum content is inclusive of coparents, spouses, and romantic partners as coparents given their role in monitoring children's emotional well-being and activities to ensure that they always stay in an alcohol and drug-free social environment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both parents participate in a 1-hour parent session. • Parents also attend a 1-hour session jointly with their children every week to engage in structured events and activities as a family. • Additionally, the parents spend time with each other and their children during a meal following the group sessions. The mealtime includes informal family practice time and coaching by the group leader.

General Fatherhood/Parenting Education Curricula

Supporting Father Involvement

This curriculum is based on an empirically supported family systems model and on a belief that most fathers wish to be positively involved in their children's lives. Throughout the 16 sessions, the following five interconnected family domains are covered: (1) Individual characteristics of parents; (2) Parent-child relationship quality; (3) Couple or coparenting relationship quality; (4) Intergenerational transmission of parent-child involvement and relationships, and (5) External influences such as employment, environmental stressors, and social supports

Length	Target population	Curriculum objectives	Description of coparenting/romantic relationship content	Coparent involvement
16, 2-hour sessions	All fathers or all couples (two versions of this curriculum)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthen couple, coparenting, and parent-child relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the version for couples, fathers and their coparents (whether romantically involved or not) attend all sessions together except for two (Sessions 5 and 13). Multiple sessions specifically address coparenting or couple relationships. These sessions cover strengths in coparenting relationships, problem solving and couple communication, serious conflict and domestic violence, parenting styles, and division of parenting responsibilities. During Sessions 5 and 13, the group is divided by gender and couples participate in different discussions and activities. Fathers participate in activities with their child(ren), while mothers discuss concepts such as gatekeeping and communication. In the version for fathers, similar content is covered but the activities differ. Sessions 5 and 13 are identical to the version for couples: fathers and their coparents are separated by gender and participate in different discussions and activities. Coparents do not participate in any other content beyond these two sessions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the version for couples, coparents join fathers in every session except for two where fathers and coparents are divided by gender. In the version for fathers, coparents are only asked to participate in Sessions 5 and 13 where they meet with other coparents and discuss relevant topics. Fathers are also asked to complete homework assignments with their coparent at home.

General Fatherhood/Parenting Education Curricula

The Art Of Positive Parenting*

This curriculum provides a framework for conversation and self-reflection. Fathers learn different ways of communicating in a healthy way with their children and coparents.

Length	Target population	Curriculum objectives	Description of coparenting/romantic relationship content	Coparent involvement
8, 2-hour weekly sessions	All fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designed to help fathers build or rebuild their relationships with their children Provide a framework for conversation and self-reflection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Romantic relationships are the focus of Session 6, titled “Democracy in the Home.” During this session, fathers learn that all family members have a voice in making decisions. Facilitators cover topics related to reducing power struggles and creating harmony in the home. Fathers participate in discussions focused on what they think a family and home should look like, and they develop a family “playbook” that they can follow when issues or disagreements arise in the home. Coparenting relationships are the focus of Session 7, titled “Positive Parenting.” This session covers communication skills and conflict resolution. Fathers identify triggers for conflict and brainstorm ideas on how to handle disagreements. This session also discusses the point of view of the coparent and how fathers and coparents should aim to find a middle ground to have a healthy coparenting relationship. Facilitators emphasize that the principles fathers learn in this class apply to all coparents. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This curriculum does not engage coparents.

General Fatherhood/Parenting Education Curricula

Tyro Dads

The TYRO Dads curriculum focuses on how fathers can “better their best.” Specifically, this curriculum is focused on the individual, who they are, who they want to be, how they see the world, and how to reexamine experiences – to help fathers redefine themselves. The TYRO Dads curriculum is often supplemented with Couple Communication I and II and TYRO JET employment readiness curricula.

Length	Target population	Curriculum objectives	Description of coparenting/romantic relationship content	Coparent involvement
10, 2-hour sessions spread over 90 days	All fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve family relationships • Improve conflict resolution skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This curriculum does not speak directly to coparenting and romantic relationships, but rather to general skills that strengthen fathers' relationships. • After completing TYRO Dads, fathers and their significant others can attend a supplemental curricula titled Couple Communication I and II. The romantic relationships content under these curricula focus on improving family relationships, talking and listening skills, and conflict resolution skills. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The TYRO Dads curriculum does not engage coparents. • Fathers' significant others are invited to attend all sessions in the supplemental Couple Communication curricula.

General Fatherhood/Parenting Education Curricula

Walking The Line

This curriculum was developed for fathers currently involved in the justice system. It aims to help fathers realize who they are as a person, understand the traits and emotions that serve as barriers in communication, and how to have reasonable expectations in life and relationships.

Length	Target population	Curriculum objectives	Description of coparenting/romantic relationship content	Coparent involvement
15 sessions (units) spread over 17 hours; each unit lasts between 45-95 minutes	Fathers with justice system involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and maintain healthy relationships • Develop healthy communication skills • Manage stress and anger • Prepare participants for re-entry or managing their prison terms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three out of the 15 units are dedicated to romantic relationships. Unit 8 discusses the power of expectations. Unit 9 discusses the chemistry of love. Unit 10 discusses relationships and commitment. • The curriculum addresses romantic relationships by 1) providing models of healthy interpersonal and romantic relationships, 2) providing training in communication and conflict management skills, 3) providing training in skills to foster emotional safety (empathy and emotional understanding), 4) fostering awareness of how adult romantic relationships impact children, 5) providing information on how parental conflict and aggression are harmful to children, 6) fostering community integration and social support, 7) providing information on benefits of committed, secure relationships (i.e., marriage), 8) providing skills for handling conflict and talking without fighting, and 9) helping people understand and manage relationship expectations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This curriculum does not engage coparents.

Relationship Education Curricula

Focus For Fathers*

While this curriculum does not directly target fathers' coparenting or romantic relationships, it is written to help men have healthy relationships with anyone in their lives. Topics include the following: healthy communication, effects of unhealthy relationships and the impact on children, power and control, and what a healthy relationship looks like. The curriculum is comprised of three sections that build on each other. The first section focuses on fathers reflecting on their histories and understanding how their parenting styles have been influenced by their parents, and addresses how coparenting is essential for parenting moving forward. The second section is focused on identifying roles of fathers and personal strengths. The third section is focused on implementing a plan that addresses the father's needs and their children's needs.

Length	Target population	Curriculum objectives	Description of coparenting/romantic relationship content	Coparent involvement
10, 2-hour weekly sessions	All fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase fathers' ability to support their children emotionally and financially • Provide tools to build a better coparenting relationship • Improve parenting skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coparenting is the main topic during Week 2 of the curriculum. Facilitators discuss the value of the mother's role in a child's life and the need for parents to communicate and work together for the well-being of the child. • Coparenting is revisited during Week 5 where facilitators further emphasize the unique role that mothers play in a child's life and how children need different things from both parents—one parent cannot serve both roles. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This curriculum does not engage coparents.

Relationship Education Curricula

Native Wellness

This curriculum is focused on relationship education. Knowledge about romantic relationships is covered and elaborated on in each subsequent session, with an emphasis on cultural awareness around historical trauma and related tribal experiences.

Length	Target population	Curriculum objectives	Description of coparenting/romantic relationship content	Coparent involvement
8 hours	Native fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy conflict resolution • Living in balance • Better sex/intimacy 	<p>The healthy relationships curriculum is organized into eight chapters:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction: Healthy relationships and Native wellness • Historical Trauma, Healing & Wellness: Growing beyond multi-generational impacts of historical trauma • Healthy Gender Roles: Recognizing the strengths in gender differences • Healthy Conflict Resolution: Practicing healthy ways to resolve conflict in relationships • Healthy Communication: Improving current communication skills • Creating Healthy Relationships: Bringing two people closer together as a couple • Healthy Sexuality: Discovering healthy intimacy • Living in Balance: Creating the relationship you want 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This curriculum does not engage coparents.

NOTE: The curricula marked with an (*) were developed by a program that participated in the study.

Appendix B: Detailed Methodology

Study Design. Child Trends used a qualitative study design to gather rich context on the experiences of program staff and participants. We worked with key stakeholders including OPRE, OFA, and an expert panel comprised of fatherhood and relationship researchers and practitioners to develop the study objectives, approach, and design. Interview protocols were reviewed by three members of the expert panel and were piloted with fathers participating in fatherhood programs. These fathers were referred to us by members of the expert panel. Study procedures were reviewed and approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) as well as the Child Trends Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Site Selection and Recruitment. To identify programs for participation, the study team reviewed:

- OFA-supplied documents from RF grantees including grantee applications and performance progress reports
- Publicly available information on fatherhood programs that were not RF grantees including websites and conference presentations

Based on this review, we developed a set of guiding criteria to select programs for further screening. Factors considered were:

- The program's geographic location and urban/rural service area
- The populations of fathers served
- Reported program offerings around healthy relationships

Screening and enrollment were completed on a rolling basis from March through August 2020. We first reached out to project directors of prioritized programs via email to introduce the study and request a phone call to conduct a screening. The screening calls lasted 30-60 minutes and sought to confirm information on the criteria described above as well as program interest and availability. Ultimately, we screened 14 programs and enrolled 10. One program withdrew after the screener but before additional data collection could begin due to time constraints.

Participant Recruitment. Once a program was enrolled, program directors identified at least one director and one facilitator to participate in interviews. Program directors were provided with inclusion criteria for fathers and coparents and asked to identify up to six fathers and, when applicable, up to four coparents for participation. Inclusion criteria for fathers included having participated in the fatherhood program within the past year, although several fathers interviewed completed programming up to 18 months prior. The study team also made efforts to recruit "nonparticipating" fathers into the study. "Nonparticipating fathers" were defined as fathers who participated in the fatherhood program as a whole but did not receive relationships services, or fathers who dropped out of the fatherhood program without completing the relationships services component. Coparents had to be coparenting with a father that participated in the fatherhood program within the past year, but not necessarily with a father who participated in the study. However, all six coparents interviewed were coparenting with a father who also participated in the study. Project directors contacted fathers and coparents to gauge interest and availability and, with the father or coparent's permission, provided the study team with participant contact information. The study team then reached out to potential participants directly via phone to describe the study and schedule interviews if interested. With the participant's permission, consent forms were sent via email in advance of the interview. We attempted to reach participants four times before marking them as declined.

Telephone Interviews. The study team completed 24 interviews with program staff, including both program directors (1-2 per program) and facilitators (1-2 per program), 36 interviews with fathers (3-7 per program, including 32 fathers who had completed programming and four nonparticipating fathers), and six

interviews with coparents of fathers from four programs. Interviews with program staff focused on the content and delivery of romantic and coparenting relationship services, whether and how programs engaged coparents or partners, priorities for hiring and staffing for healthy relationship programming, and perceptions of fathers' strengths and needs related to coparenting and romantic relationships. Interviews with fathers (including nonparticipating fathers) explored their experiences and needs related to coparenting and romantic relationships, perceptions of relationships services offered by the programs, and levels of engagement in these services. Nonparticipating father interviews also included questions about why fathers decided not to participate in healthy relationship services. Coparent interviews focused on how coparents viewed fathers' participation in relationship services and whether and how they themselves engaged with the program.

Interviews took place between March and December 2020. All interviews were conducted by phone by trained interviewers using semi-structured interview guides and lasted 60-90 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded with the participant's permission. In most cases, interviewers also took notes on participant responses during the interviews to supplement audio-recordings. Throughout data collection, interviewers met every two weeks to debrief, share insights or emerging themes, and make minor adjustments to protocols or procedures as needed. Adjustments made included small wording changes to protocol questions and the reordering or omitting of questions. The study team also made small wording changes and changes to the ordering of the questions based on feedback from an internal expert on working with AIAN populations. After each interview with fathers and coparents, interviewers administered a short questionnaire to collect demographic and family information about study participants to contextualize interview findings. Fathers and coparents received a \$30 gift card to either Walmart or Amazon, distributed via email or text. Program staff did not receive an incentive for participation.

Qualitative Data Analysis. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by an outside vendor, using a process approved by the Child Trends data security policy. The audio recordings for interviews with five fathers were not high quality enough to produce transcriptions. One of these interviews was excluded from the analysis, and interviewer notes were analyzed for the remaining four interviews. Transcripts from all program staff and father interviews were uploaded to Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software. Coparent interviews were analyzed separately due to the small sample size. For program staff and father interviews, coding schemes were developed through both inductive and deductive processes. Preliminarily coding schemes were based on the interview guides and patterns that emerged during data collection. At the start of data analysis, a team of five analysts refined the coding schemes inductively, incorporating new codes as they emerged. The analysis team tested these schemes on the same program staff and father interview transcripts and met multiple times to discuss any discrepancies and ensure they had arrived at a common understanding of how the codes should be used. Coding lasted from August to December 2020, throughout which time the analysis team met every two weeks to discuss coding progress and adjust the coding schemes as needed. A designated "master coder" performed spot checks throughout the coding process to ensure consistency. After coding, the analysis team used a content analysis approach, reviewing code reports generated in Dedoose and searching for recurring patterns and themes. The team compiled summaries of emerging themes in priority domains (e.g., healthy relationship services, coparent engagement, etc.) which were used to identify and refine key themes for this report. In writing, each theme was reviewed by multiple analysis team members to ensure that they represented a shared understanding of the data.

Curricula Review. The study team conducted a review of curricula related to healthy relationships used by participating programs for additional information about the approaches used by participating programs to address relationships (**Appendix A**). **Appendix A** also serves as a resource for readers interested in learning more about each curriculum. We identified and compiled a list of all curricula based on telephone screeners and interviews with program directors. We then consulted various sources to gather information on the curricula related to our study objectives. These included full copies of the curriculum (when available), publicly available information on the curriculum, transcripts from interviews with program staff, and curriculum-related documents shared by programs (e.g., handouts, tables of contents). We reviewed all available information and compiled information on the following:

- Curriculum overview and focus
- Curriculum length and duration of sessions
- Target population
- Curriculum objectives
- Content specific to romantic relationships and/or coparenting relationships
- Whether and how the curriculum engages coparents or romantic partners
- Whether the curriculum is standardized (i.e., manualized and publicly available) or developed in house

In cases where information was not available or programs developed their own curriculum, the curriculum descriptions were shared with curriculum developers or the relevant program to verify the accuracy of the contents. After this information was compiled, key takeaways were integrated with findings from the interview analysis and helped to inform Theme 1.

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