

By Danielle Whicher, Lexi Ouellette, and Julia Alamillo

Engaging Community Members in the Research Process to Enhance Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Program Evaluations

Healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood (HMRF) programs aim to support the well-being of children and families in communities throughout the United States. Evaluating these programs can improve future programming, and engaging community members in evaluations can produce more equitable research that addresses communities' needs more effectively. In the HMRF context, community members can include current and former program participants, program staff, and other interested parties in the communities served by these programs.

This brief highlights strategies that HMRF researchers can use to engage community members as co-creators in the research process.¹ It describes the potential benefits of these strategies and provides tips and tools for adapting these strategies to a particular program and evaluation context. When determining which strategies to adopt, researchers should consider available resources and the specific needs of their evaluations. Not all strategies will be appropriate for every HMRF program evaluation.



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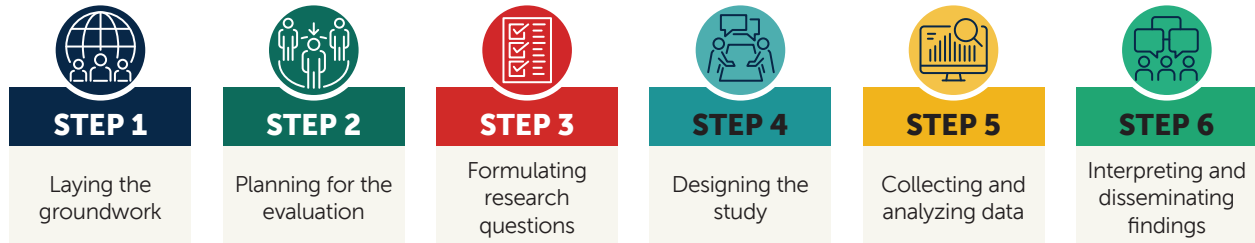
About the FRAMING Research project

This work is part of the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage—Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project, sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. ACF has partnered with Mathematica and its subcontractor Public Strategies to conduct the FRAMING Research study. This work is derived from a white paper produced for the project.^a The project focuses on gathering and summarizing information on healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programming and connected areas, using literature reviews, knowledge maps, expert consultations, and technical work groups. The project team is also drafting a series of white papers to explore key topics that emerge during the project.

^a Whicher, D., J. Alamillo, L. Ouellette, and B. Williams. "Engaging Community Members in Evaluations of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Programs." OPRE Report #2022-55. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

¹ The strategies presented in this brief were identified through a literature review of empirical studies that used community-engaged research methods in settings similar to those of HMRF programs or with populations that resembled HMRF program participants. See the 2022 report "[Engaging Community Members in Evaluations of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood Programs](#)" for a more detailed discussion of each strategy for engaging community members, as well as a discussion of challenges to community engagement.

Steps of the research process in which researchers can engage community members



STEP 1. Laying the groundwork

To establish a solid foundation for evaluation and community engagement activities, HMRF researchers should cultivate a deep understanding of the community context, practice cultural humility, and assemble a diverse research team. Specific strategies for each of these components include:

Understand the community context

- Conduct a landscape analysis or needs assessment, which are formal approaches to identifying the strengths, needs, and priorities of the community.
- Learn about the demographics, politics, and history of the community, including any history of discrimination. Researchers can do this in many ways, such as by interviewing key informants, having informal conversations with community members, or reviewing websites or social media accounts.

Practice cultural humility

- Learn about the power dynamics in the community, including any historical distrust of researchers, to create a setting that empowers all community members to be decision makers in the research process.
- Use a self-assessment tool to measure the equity and cultural responsiveness of planned evaluation activities (Box 1).

Assemble a diverse research team

- Ensure the research team is diverse in terms of racial and ethnic backgrounds, family backgrounds, and relationship histories. The team should include staff whose backgrounds align with the community or who have a strong understanding of the community context.²

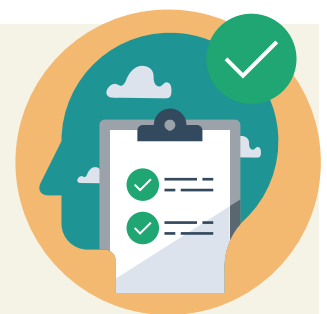
Box 1: Researchers can use a self-assessment tool to determine whether evaluation plans will equitably engage communities

These are example items from a self-assessment tool developed by Public Policy Associates in 2015.^b Response options range from 1 = *Never* to 5 = *Always*.

Cultural competence of the evaluation practices

Engage community members, consumers, and stakeholders in:

- Formulating the evaluation questions to show equitable results
- Conducting interviews, surveys, and other primary data collection activities
- Defining criteria for "success"
- Interpreting data and informing the analysis
- Disseminating and applying findings to the community



^b Public Policy Associates Inc. "Is My Evaluation Practice Culturally Responsive?" Lansing, MI: Public Policy Associates Inc, 2015. Available at https://publicpolicy.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/REL_Self_Assessment_rev_Sept_2015.pdf.

² In the event that research teams are not able to include individuals with similar backgrounds to those of community members, the team should at least conduct a training to ensure that members of the team understand the community context. If possible, research teams should engage community members in this training.



STEP 2. Planning for the evaluation

Engaging community members in the planning process is essential for implementing a meaningful and useful HMRF evaluation. To engage community members in evaluation planning, researchers should:

Identify community partners

- Use information from the landscape analysis to identify people and organizations invested in supporting the population that the HMRF program serves. These partners can bring diverse perspectives to the evaluation.
- Invite community members to engage with the evaluation or to recommend other people who may want to contribute to the evaluation planning efforts.

Establish community members' roles in the evaluation

- Work with community members to identify roles and a time commitment on the research team that suit their expertise and interests.
- Produce a short handout describing the study and why the research team would like to engage community members (see Appendix A for a template).
- Compensate community members for their engagement and offer training to support their comfort with research activities.



STEP 3. Formulating research questions

Researchers should invest time in understanding the community's priorities so they can formulate research questions that are important to community members and feasible within the program and funding context. Strategies to accomplish this include:

Understand community priorities

- Have conversations with community members to identify research priorities; ensure the research team listens to many perspectives.
- Gather input on what outcomes are meaningful to community members and what counts as evidence. Clearly define evaluation terms, such as "outcome measures," using language that is accessible to the community.

Select research questions

- Work with community members to select research questions that are important to them and feasible to address within the scope of the evaluation.
- Build community capacity to monitor long-term outcomes of interest that are a priority to the community but are beyond the scope of the evaluation.

Clarify preexisting requirements

- Be upfront with community members about which elements of the evaluation are open to input and which elements cannot be changed and why.
- To the extent possible, explore opportunities to add or reframe research questions to reflect community priorities.



STEP 4. Designing the study

Collaborating with community members to design a study can greatly strengthen the evaluation's implementation and its ability to generate findings relevant to HMRF programming. Specifically, researchers can work with community members to:

Select a study method

- Use easily accessible descriptions to inform community members about various study methods, such as implementation studies, randomized controlled trials, and quasi-experimental designs; describe the benefits and risks of different methods.
- Present the study method that researchers feel is best for addressing the research questions and seek community input.

Choose a data collection approach

- Inform community members about various data collection approaches, such as surveys, focus groups, and interviews, and be open to other, nontraditional data collection methods community members suggest.
- Solicit input on which approaches are acceptable and culturally appropriate for study participants while providing the information necessary to answer the research questions.

Design data collection instruments

- Engage community members in instrument development to help ensure questions are relevant and clear, and that the language is culturally appropriate.
- Ask community members to help pilot test the data collection instruments.

Recruit study participants

- Partner with community members to recruit participants. Community members might have an easier time developing trust and rapport with the population of interest than researchers.
- Engage community members in developing written materials or advertisements so the materials resonate with the community and attract participants.



STEP 5. Collecting and analyzing data

Engaging community members in the data collection process can help boost response rates and data quality. Community members can also offer insights about contextual factors that researchers should consider when analyzing data. Specific strategies can include:

Identify factors affecting response rates

- Work with community members to identify challenges to recruiting or engaging research participants and solutions to address those challenges.
- Ask for input on incentives to offer research participants, such as services that are valued in the community or the appropriate type and dollar amount for a gift card.

Involve community members in data collection and analysis

- Train community members to serve as data collectors when conducting surveys, interviews, or focus groups, as this might yield more honest answers from participants.
- Gather input from community members on the analysis plan, such as how to construct variables or subgroups that researchers should consider in the analyses.
- Engage community members in extracting themes from qualitative data.



STEP 6. Interpreting and disseminating findings

Research findings can help shape new HMRF programming and future policy. Involving community members in interpreting findings can help ensure findings are valid and useful to the community. Community members can also enhance dissemination efforts. To engage the community in interpreting and disseminating findings, researchers should:

Solicit feedback on research findings

- Ask for help interpreting preliminary research findings. Community members are well positioned to put findings in context, including how issues with program implementation might have contributed to the findings.

Engage community members in dissemination

- Work with community members to connect with organizations that might be interested in learning about the implementation or effectiveness of an HMRF program.
- Gather input on effective formats for reaching target audiences, such as emails, blog posts, practice briefs, and social media campaigns.

Use findings to support community change

- Have conversations with community members to determine how research findings can better support the needs of the community, including future HMRF program participants and their families (Box 2).

Community members have a critical perspective to contribute to HMRF evaluations. Engaging them throughout the research process can help research teams ensure that their evaluations meet the needs of the community and are used to make positive changes that can reduce inequities. Being engaged in evaluations can also help community members learn new skills and connect them with others who have similar experiences or interests. Although it may not be possible to implement all the approaches mentioned in this brief, HMRF researchers should carefully consider what is feasible in terms of engaging community members in order to promote equity in the communities that HMRF programs serve.


Box 2: Regardless of the results of an HMRF program evaluation, researchers should use those results to improve the community

When the results of an HMRF program evaluation show that the program achieved its intended goals, community members can provide advice on how to sustain the program. When the results of an evaluation reveal that certain factors prevented a program from achieving its goals, community members can provide advice on reshaping future programming. For example, an evaluation of an RF program might find that fathers in the program did not build strong connections with program facilitators—and strong connections have been shown to support program effectiveness. Community members, especially those who have participated in the program, might have advice regarding how to encourage stronger relationship building.



This brief was written by Danielle Whicher, Lexi Ouellette, and Julia Alamillo of Mathematica, 1100 1st St NE, Washington, DC 20002, under contract with OPRE, ACF, DHHS (#HHSP2332015000351). OPRE Project Officers: Kriti Jain and Samantha Illangasekare and Project Advisor: Jesse Coe (Jefferson Solutions). Mathematica Project Director: Julia Alamillo and Principal Investigator: Sarah Avellar.

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Appendix A:

Creating a Handout to Solicit Community Engagement on an HMRF Evaluation

Instructions. The following template can help healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood (HMRF) researchers create a one-page handout to share with community members. The purpose of the handout is to explain why community members are being asked to assist with the design and implementation of an HMRF program evaluation.

Preparing this one-page handout can help researchers highlight the importance of community involvement and address many of the questions community members might have. However, the handout will likely not be sufficient on its own. Instead, researchers should couple it with meetings with community members to discuss the evaluation and the plan for community member involvement. Such meetings can offer a venue for community members to provide input on the engagement plan and make an informed decision about whether they would like to be involved in the evaluation.

When creating this handout, researchers should aim to ensure the language is easy to understand and includes larger fonts and white space. Researchers might want to check the reading level of their handout, aiming for an 8th-grade reading level or lower.³ Researchers can check the reading level using Microsoft Word's readability statistics function.

³ Eltorai, A.E., S. Ghanian, C.A. Adams Jr., C.T. Born, and A.H. Daniels. "Readability of Patient Education Materials on the American Association for Surgery of Trauma Website." *Archives of Trauma Research*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2014.

TEMPLATE for a handout to solicit community engagement in an HMRF evaluation

Evaluation name

Make sure the evaluation name describes the program being evaluated and the community in which the evaluation will occur. An example evaluation name could be:

- *Evaluating the Healthy Marriage Program in City, State*

Why we are conducting this evaluation

Briefly describe the goal of the evaluation. Goals for HMRF evaluations might include:

- *Understanding if a healthy marriage program for couples increased couples' likelihood of staying in a relationship or improved the quality of their relationships.*
- *Understanding if a responsible fatherhood program supported fathers' healthy interactions with their children.*
- *Understanding how a program could be improved so that it better meets the needs of participants.*

In this section, researchers might also want to mention who is funding the evaluation.

Why we want to engage you

Describe the goals of engaging community members in the evaluation effort. This section should be concise. The next section can provide additional detail about the engagement approach. Statements could include reasons such as:

- *We want to make sure the evaluation answers questions that are important to community members so the results drive community improvement. We would like your advice on what questions you think are important.*
- *We want to make sure the evaluation provides information that program staff and others in the community can use to make the HMRF program better. We hope you can provide advice on how to improve the evaluation.*

How we want to involve you

Provide information on what parts of the evaluation the research team would like community members to be involved with, how the research team would like community members to be involved (including how much decision-making authority community members will have), and how much time community members will be asked to devote to the evaluation.

Researchers should refer to this practice brief for examples of ways they can engage community members during each phase of the research process.

When describing how the research team would like community members to be involved, examples of language researchers could consider include:

- *We hope to involve you as a member of the research team, which will include making decisions about the study design and conducting the evaluation. There is flexibility regarding your level of involvement, depending on your availability and interest. The research team has weekly, hour-long phone calls that we will invite you to participate in when you are available. We will provide background information before and during the calls so you have the information you need to take part in the discussion.*
- *During monthly, in-person meetings, the research team will ask you for your advice on [x, y, z] aspects of the evaluation design and evaluation conduct. These meetings will last about 90 minutes and will involve you and other people from the community. We will schedule these meetings at a time that works for you and other community members. Before the meetings, we will provide you with information about the topics we will discuss.*

How being involved can benefit you

Describe how being involved in an HMRF evaluation might benefit community members, but be careful not to oversell potential benefits because this might come across as insincere. Mention the remuneration or other incentives that community members will receive as compensation for the time they spend designing or conducting the evaluation. Potential benefits might include:

- *Helping improve the evaluation approach so the results are useful to the community*
- *Helping create research findings that program staff and others in the community can use to improve HMRF programs*
- *Learning more about the process of designing and conducting evaluations*
- *Establishing relationships with others in the community who share similar experiences or interests*