

By Sarah Avellar, Heather Gordon, and Robert G. Wood

Highlights from the FRAMING Research Responsible Fatherhood Technical Work Group

Children whose fathers support them emotionally and financially tend to fare better on a wide range of outcomes than children who do not have their fathers' support (Adamsons and Johnson 2013; Cabrera et al. 2017; Cancian et al. 2013; Choi and Pyun 2014; Yoder et al. 2016). This pattern is not limited to fathers who live with their children or who have higher levels of income (Adamsons and Johnson 2013; Roopnarine and Hossain 2013). Even so, many fathers—despite their intentions and efforts—are unable to provide the support and involvement their children need. These fathers might benefit from additional support or guidance on parenting, on working with a co-parent, and on providing financial support for their children (Carlson et al. 2017; Fagan and Barnett 2003; Jones and Mosher 2013; Mincy et al. 2016; Nepomnyaschy 2007).

For this reason, the federal government has made a long-standing commitment

to support responsible fatherhood programming. Since 2006, Congress has dedicated substantial funding each year to support both healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood (HMRF) programming (U.S. Congress 2010). The Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) oversees this funding and partners with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), also within ACF, to build the evidence base to strengthen the HMRF programming it supports (OFA 2019).

To systematically identify current gaps in the knowledge base for HMRF programming, ACF undertook the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage—Illuminating the Next Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project. ACF has partnered with Mathematica and its subcontractor Public Strategies to conduct the study (OPRE n.d.).



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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. The FRAMING Research project team gathers and synthesizes information through literature reviews, knowledge mapping, stakeholder meetings, expert consultations, and two technical work groups—one with a focus on healthy marriage and relationship education programming and the other on responsible fatherhood (RF) programming. The project team is also drafting a series of white papers to explore key topics related to HMRF programming that emerge during the course of the project.



THE FRAMING RESEARCH RF TECHNICAL WORK GROUP

This brief describes the first meeting of the RF technical work group for the FRAMING Research project, which was held in July 2019. The brief highlights key points from the meeting; it does not cover all comments members of the work group made. The group included RF practitioners and research experts on RF programming (Table 1). ACF convened the group to provide input on the focus of future research to inform RF programming. The day focused on three topics relevant to the RF field: (1) measuring the effects of RF programs on child well-being; (2) improving fathers' engagement with their children through RF programs; and (3) increasing participation rates in RF programs. These topics emerged from the project team's review of relevant literature and discussions with ACF about agency priorities. The technical work group members also shared their insights on RF research priorities more broadly. The day concluded with technical work group members participating in a brainstorming session on RF research priorities.



MEASURING THE EFFECT OF RF PROGRAMS ON CHILD WELL-BEING

A central motivation for federally funded RF programming is to increase fathers' support of and engagement with their children and, by doing so, improve their children's well-being (ACF 2015a, 2015b). The first technical work group discussion focused on strategies to measure the effects of RF programs on child well-being.

Before launching the discussion, the project team noted some of the challenges to building the evidence base in this area. Specifically, the team noted that measuring these impacts is particularly challenging because RF programs often serve primarily nonresident fathers who might have limited or irregular contact with their children (Cheadle et al. 2010). This limited contact can make it difficult for nonresident fathers to report on the status of their children on follow-up surveys because they might not know relevant details about the child's behavior or circumstances. Fathers' limited access to their children can also hinder the study team's efforts to gain access to these children to assess their development directly. These constraints on the feasibility of collecting child well-being data have likely contributed to the lack of evidence on the effects of RF programs on child well-being.

Because of the challenges associated with measuring child well-being directly when studying RF programs, many of the comments from technical work group members focused on how best to measure fathers' parenting, an area closely related to child well-being that can be more readily measured by researchers studying these programs. Technical work group members noted the following during this part of the discussion:

- Researchers must be attentive to whether the parenting measures they use are appropriate for the population they are studying. Some measures adapted from maternal parenting measures might not capture the ways fathers typically interact with their children, particularly nonresident fathers.
- Some father involvement measures do not account for potential gatekeeping on the part of mothers. Nonresident fathers might have limited involvement with their children because they do not have access to them. Researchers should keep this in mind when interpreting findings.
- Researchers should consider direct measures of the quality of the father-child relationship, not just the amount of time fathers spend with their children, which could be a poor proxy for relationship quality. Ideally, researchers would gather data from children on the quality of their relationship with their father.
- Several technical work group members noted that RF program participants and their children often live surrounded by violence in their communities. Urban fathers often focus on guiding their children on how to navigate this environment and how to stay safe when violence spikes in the

neighborhood or when interacting with the police. This guidance, an important aspect of the parenting these fathers provide, is not currently captured in research.

- Child well-being is multifaceted and includes mental and physical health, school readiness, and cognitive development. Researchers should aim to look at a broad set of child well-being measures but be careful not to overburden fathers and their families with data collection efforts.



IMPROVING FATHERS' ENGAGEMENT WITH THEIR CHILDREN THROUGH RF PROGRAMS

Recent research shows the promise of fatherhood programs for enhancing father engagement (Holmes et al. 2018). Several recent studies showed favorable effects on outcomes such as fathers' nurturing behaviors with their children and fathers' efficacy, which is their perceived sense of control in providing parental care for child (Avellar et al. 2018; Cancian et al. 2019; Kim and Joon Jang 2018).¹ The size of the impacts on father engagement were generally modest, however, suggesting there might be opportunities for improvement. The technical work group discussion focused on how programs might strengthen their effects on fathers' engagement.

Technical work group members noted the following during this part of the discussion:

- Several technical work group members noted that access to children is a major issue for nonresident fathers, which could be an impediment to programs' effectiveness in improving parenting skills. Fathers cannot practice and build on parenting skills learned at an RF program without access to the child. Never married, nonresidential fathers often do not have a formal visitation agreement with their co-parent and thus do not have recourse if the mother prevents him from seeing the child.
- Recognizing that fathers alone often cannot solve co-parenting issues, some programs have started working with mothers. However, this approach brings its own set of challenges because of issues such as past intimate partner violence, which might cause the mother to feel unsafe being around the father.
- Programs should address the view that fathers are a "cash register" whose value to their children is primarily economic. Because of this belief, co-parents might restrict access to children if fathers cannot financially support them. Fathers themselves might withdraw from their children's lives if they cannot support the children or buy treats or gifts when spending time together. Both fathers and their co-parents need to see the benefit to their children of fathers "playing, not just paying." For example, programs can highlight the value of fathers engaging with and nurturing their children while teaching those parenting skills. Emphasizing fathers' non-economic contributions to their families could help keep fathers engaged in program services, and more importantly, their children's lives.
- Approaches to improve RF programs must be culturally appropriate. For example, one technical work group member noted that children in Hispanic families served by RF programs often live with both parents. Therefore, issues concerning access to the child might be less relevant for Hispanic fathers than for other fathers served by RF programs.



INCREASING PARTICIPATION RATES IN RF PROGRAMS

For RF programs to be effective, participants must have substantial exposure to them (Nation et al. 2003). However, participation can be a challenge in these programs (Laxman et al. 2019). Technical work group members discussed why regular attendance was often a challenge and how best to address this issue.

Technical work group members noted the following during this part of the discussion:

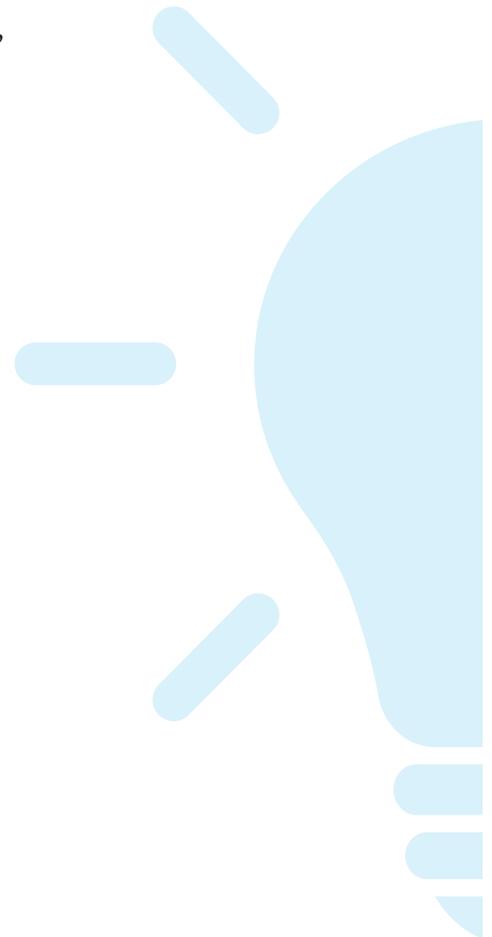
- The foundation for engaging fathers is appropriate content and suitable staff. Appropriate content is relevant to fathers' lives and provided in an interactive setting rather than through didactic lecturing. Staff should have similar life experiences and characteristics as participants. If they do not, staff must establish themselves as informed allies. Staff should also be empathetic, understanding, and encouraging of this behavior among participants to create a welcoming community.
- Programs require an adaptable structure to meet the needs of the fathers they serve. Recognizing that fathers often have competing demands and conflicts, programs should offer flexibility, such as providing make-up sessions or meeting fathers in their homes or other convenient locations.
- Managing expectations can improve attendance. Some fathers might anticipate that participating in services will lead to rapid changes in employment or relationships with their co-parent and children. By emphasizing that development can take time and establishing a realistic timeline for change, programs can reduce the risk that fathers will become discouraged and withdraw.
- Including children in RF programs can be a powerful motivator for fathers to attend. Nonresident fathers, however, might have limited access to their children, which makes joint participation difficult to achieve.
- Regular participation is not always realistic. Many fathers have substantial challenges that interfere with program attendance. In addition, environmental factors can negatively affect participation. For example, a spike in violence in the neighborhood in which program workshops are held might make fathers reluctant to attend the services.
- Linking incentives to employment opportunities might increase program participation. For example, offering access to forklift certification as an incentive for participation could enhance fathers' interest in the program overall. Programs also might consider offering incentives later in services to encourage sustained participation.



FUTURE RF RESEARCH PRIORITIES

The project team facilitated a brainstorming session with technical work group members about priority research questions and evaluation ideas related to RF programming. The technical work group members worked in small groups to generate the following ideas.

- **Balance specificity and universality.** Research and practice require a mix of knowledge and information specific to program participants and broader context. For example, some of the foundations of good parenting (such as positive attachment, behavioral engagement, and connection) are universal. But communities might use different approaches to establish that foundation. Research and practice must find a way to reflect both.
- **Better serve immigrant communities.** The group was interested in learning how RF programs can better serve immigrant fathers, fathers who do not speak English, or fathers who speak English as a second language. Immigrant fathers and the programs working with them are the best sources of information to learn more. Researchers should use focus groups to hear from these groups directly.
- **Capitalize on qualitative research.** Evaluations should make more and better use of qualitative research methods. The qualitative studies should be designed so the results could help researchers distill a set of promising strategies to improve programs' instruction.
- **Connect research and practice.** The field should invest in practice-informed evaluation studies with strong partnerships between evaluators and program staff. The relationship between programs and evaluators often does not happen organically. Therefore, funders, evaluators, and programs must carefully cultivate such relationships.
- **Consider environmental influences on participation.** The field requires more insight into the environmental factors that affect fathers' participation. The group cautioned that these factors, including racism and devaluation of fathers, can play a role in diminishing participation, which might be beyond the scope of what RF programs can affect.
- **Draw on existing child well-being measures.** Noted challenges in measuring child well-being notwithstanding, future research should use established measures of child well-being, including those based on the characteristics of thriving children, for a strengths-based approach. There is no need to develop new measures if existing measures work well.



- **Fit curricula to the target population.** The field should examine how programs choose curricula and whether existing curricula meet the needs of the range of families and fathers currently served by RF programs. A related area for exploration is how programs can supplement a curriculum that does not meet participants' needs.
- **Understand program components.** Programs often include multiple distinct components, such as workshops and case management. The group was interested in having research untangle the effects of each component on fathers' outcomes and whether timing of a component enhances or diminishes its effectiveness.
- **Use fathers' perception of program benefits.** To improve participation and services, the field should hear from fathers who completed a program about what they see as the most beneficial elements of fatherhood programs. Evaluators could conduct exit interviews and use information from them to help programs improve.

Table 1. FRAMING Research RF technical work group members

<p>Andrew Behnke^a Director and Professor, School of Family and Consumer Sciences, Texas State University</p>		<p>Rob Palkovitz Professor of Human Development and Family Studies, University of Delaware</p>
<p>Natasha Cabrera Professor, Department of Human Development and Quantitative Methodology, University of Maryland</p>		<p>Armon Perry Associate Professor, Kent School of Social Work, University of Louisville RF Program Director, 4 Your Child</p>
<p>Avis Files RF Program Director, Pathway Toledo</p>		<p>Halbert Sullivan Chief Executive Officer, Fathers & Families Support Center (RF grantee)</p>
<p>Waldo Johnson Associate Professor, School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago</p>		<p>Jerry Tello^a Founder and Director of Training and Capacity Building, National Compadres Network</p>

^aThese technical work group members did not attend the July meeting but participated in a call on September 12, 2019 to share their input.

Additional FRAMING Research technical work group meetings

In June 2019, the FRAMING Research project convened a technical work group focused on research priorities concerning healthy marriage and relationship education programming. A separate brief summarizes the themes from that technical work group (Wood 2020). Both the RF and healthy marriage and relationship education technical work groups will reconvene in 2020 to provide additional guidance to ACF on emerging research priorities.

ENDNOTES

¹These and other rigorous studies, however, generally did not show effects on other dimensions of parenting, including accessibility and financial responsibility (Avellar et al. 2018; Cancian et al. 2019; Kim and Joon Jang 2018; Knox and Redcross 2000; Martinez and Miller 2000; Schroeder et al. 2011).

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