

Improving Coparenting Relationship Education in Fatherhood Programs: Strategies for Engaging Coparents

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Many fatherhood programs aim to help fathers build skills to communicate more effectively and harmoniously with their coparents and improve the quality of their coparenting relationships. However, some fathers face significant and persistent challenges in their coparenting relationships, such as difficulty communicating with their coparent(s) without arguing. Because communication involves at least two individuals, improving coparenting communication skills and overall coparenting relationship quality may be more effective if fathers and coparents receive similar relationship education. Ensuring consistent coparenting relationship education for fathers and coparents can be challenging for fatherhood programs because many programs are designed to work only with fathers, and because coparents may be difficult to engage—especially when the coparenting relationship is strained.¹

Although there are potential benefits to engaging coparents in fatherhood programs,² programs should consider many factors when planning whether (and to what extent) to engage coparents, such as program resources, staff expertise and comfort, fathers' relationships with their coparents, or the group's openness to having coparents attend. Additionally, all programs should assess whether it is safe to engage coparents prior to doing so. For more information, see "Resources for Assessing and Promoting Safety when Considering Coparent Engagement."

This resource provides a range of strategies that fatherhood programs can use to engage coparents—ranging from minimal to more intensive—in programming, along with strategies for implementing coparenting relationship education when coparent engagement is not appropriate or feasible.

Resources for Assessing and Promoting Safety when Considering Coparent Engagement

[Evidence for Understanding How Healthy Relationship Programs May Influence Intimate Partner Violence](#)

[Promoting Safety: A Resource Packet for Marriage and Relationship Educators and Program Administrators](#)

► Consider options for engaging coparents in programming.

The strategies presented below provide a variety of options that fatherhood programs can use to engage coparents, ranging from minimal to more intensive engagement. Programs should consider their unique contexts (e.g., staff capacity, fathers' relationships with their coparents, number of fathers with multiple coparents, etc.) and resources when deciding which approach or approaches may work best.



Share coparenting curriculum materials and resources directly with coparents.

Send coparents a copy of the healthy relationship curriculum materials used in the program. To ensure that fathers' coparents receive the most relevant information from the curriculum, consider creating informational packets with coparenting materials such as quick tips, worksheets, or recommendations for readings or electronic resources. The curriculum materials and informational packets can be distributed to interested coparents via mail, email, or even text. Although it is best to have direct contact with coparents, this is not always possible; in such cases, encourage fathers to share materials with their coparents. This provides coparents with similar information to what is given to participating fathers without requiring them to attend in-person sessions.



This symbol indicates the level of engagement required for each strategy in this section



Host special events for fathers to attend with their coparents and children.³

Organize family dinners or graduation ceremonies^a and encourage fathers to invite their coparents and children. These events can serve as opportunities for fathers to demonstrate their ongoing commitment to being in their children's lives and establishing or maintaining a cooperative coparenting relationship.



Invite coparents to designated workshop sessions.⁴

When preparing to invite coparents to workshop sessions, fatherhood programs should:

Consider when and how often coparents should attend. Programs should allow time for participating fathers to get to know and feel comfortable with one another before inviting coparents to participate in workshop sessions. Even after coparents have been invited to attend, be sure to continue to designate some sessions as "fathers-only" to promote peer learning and ensure that fathers who are less comfortable sharing in a mixed-group setting have the space for more open discussions.

Reach out to coparents directly. Coparents may be less likely to attend workshop sessions if they are invited by fathers, particularly if the coparenting relationship is strained. To bolster coparent attendance, staff should reach out by phone or email to invite coparents to workshop sessions. When speaking with coparents, emphasize that the program is a neutral space in which fathers and coparents can work on building skills together. Before reaching out to coparents directly, though, staff should consult with fathers to determine if and how they should be invited to participate in programming.

Once coparents have been invited, fatherhood programs can choose from among several workshop formats:

Deliver content and provide opportunities for fathers and coparents to practice relationship skills together in one space. Deliver the coparenting relationship education to the large group, allowing both fathers and coparents to ask questions and discuss issues together throughout the session. This will allow each group to learn more about the other's perspective on the content. End the session with time for fathers and their coparents to practice skill-building together. Have fathers whose coparents could not or did not attend practice the skill-building exercises together in pairs or small groups.

Divide fathers and coparents into separate groups and deliver similar coparenting content to each group. Assign each group a designated facilitator to deliver coparenting relationship education and guide a discussion related to the content. This approach may minimize the

^a Graduation ceremonies cannot be funded using Office of Family Assistance (OFA) Responsible Fatherhood grant funding. As such, RF programs were required to find alternate funding to support these activities.

potential for conflict between fathers and coparents. Furthermore, fathers and coparents may be more willing to engage in open and honest discussions about their coparenting relationships when their coparent is not present. However, this approach does not allow fathers to practice the skills they learned with their coparent during programming.

Use a hybrid approach in which fathers and coparents receive coparenting content separately but come together to practice skills. Deliver coparenting relationship education to fathers and their coparents separately and then bring the two groups together to practice relationship skills in a supportive space.

For any of these approaches, offer participants—and especially coparents—the option to participate in workshop sessions virtually through video conferencing to minimize barriers to attendance.⁵ Many fatherhood programs have incorporated virtual programming options to reach fathers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Programs can use these same virtual platforms, such as Zoom or Facebook Live, to provide an option for coparents to attend sessions virtually. Virtual options for participation may improve attendance but may also make participant engagement and skills practice more difficult.



Develop parallel programming for coparents.

If possible, depending on staff capacity or funding requirements, create a parallel program for coparents. In many instances, a healthy relationship curriculum used for fathers can be tailored for use with coparents to better address their specific needs. To increase program attendance, consider partnering with local agencies to develop a referral system for both fathers and coparents. Programs considering a separate program for coparents can refer to the [National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse's Program Design and Planning](#) webpage for tips on how to get started. Although the guidance is geared toward establishing a fatherhood program, the concepts can be applied to creating a program for coparents.

▶ Maximize coparenting relationship education when coparent involvement is not possible.

It may not always be possible to involve coparents in fatherhood programming due to program resources and capacity, strained relationships between fathers and their coparents, or instances where coparents live in different geographic locations. In cases when it is not appropriate or feasible to engage coparents directly, fatherhood programs can maximize their support and help fathers build skills to use in their coparenting relationships with the following strategies.

Be strategic about when to address coparenting relationships.

Regardless of the quality of their coparenting relationships, most fathers do not enroll in fatherhood programs with the goal of improving those relationships.⁶ Fathers may show initial resistance to discussing their relationships but will often become more willing to engage once they have established a connection to the program. It is important to wait until fathers attend several sessions before beginning to address coparenting relationships so they become comfortable with each other and the facilitators.

Highlight skills that fathers can practice when coparenting relationships are strained.⁷

In addition to content about healthy and effective communication, teaching fathers skills to manage their emotions and interact respectfully with their coparents is crucial when programs cannot engage coparents. For example, fatherhood programs can teach:

Mindfulness and emotional self-regulation. Help fathers understand that they control their responses in every situation. Skills such as monitoring bodily cues (e.g., elevated heart rate) and

deep breathing techniques can help fathers recognize how they respond in certain situations and manage their reactions.

Empathy. Encourage fathers to consider coparents' perspectives (e.g., how their coparents may feel and why they may respond a particular way) to help improve communication. Fathers can verbalize their empathy by validating their coparents' feelings, which can reduce any negative emotions.

Modeling respectful behavior. Explain the negative impact that conflictual coparenting relationships can have on children's well-being and the importance of displaying respectful behaviors toward coparents. For example, fathers should never badmouth or undermine their coparent in front of their child and should avoid using their child to learn about or manipulate the other parent.

Coping skills. Foster techniques that help fathers cope with feelings of anger or loss about the current state of their coparenting relationship or deal with stress in other aspects of their lives. External stressors may cause further strain to their relationships, so programs should promote healthy coping mechanisms as one aspect of coparenting relationship education.

► References

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