



TESTING INNOVATIONS IN FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS

A Roundup of Findings from the Building Bridges and Bonds Study

A RESEARCH-PRACTICE COLLABORATION

This publication sums up the findings from the Building Bridges and Bonds (B3) study. B3 identified and tested new and promising ways to help fathers with low incomes work toward economic stability and stronger relationships with their children.

Recognizing the importance of strong and supportive relationships between fathers and children, since the 1990s Congress has authorized and funded “Responsible Fatherhood” programs to encourage fathers’ continual emotional and financial support of their children, even if they live apart. But when B3 was launched in 2015, there was not much evidence about which programs worked.¹ B3 aimed to fill that gap. From 2016 through 2019, researchers evaluated three interventions tried by six Responsible Fatherhood programs. Read more about the study design [here](#).

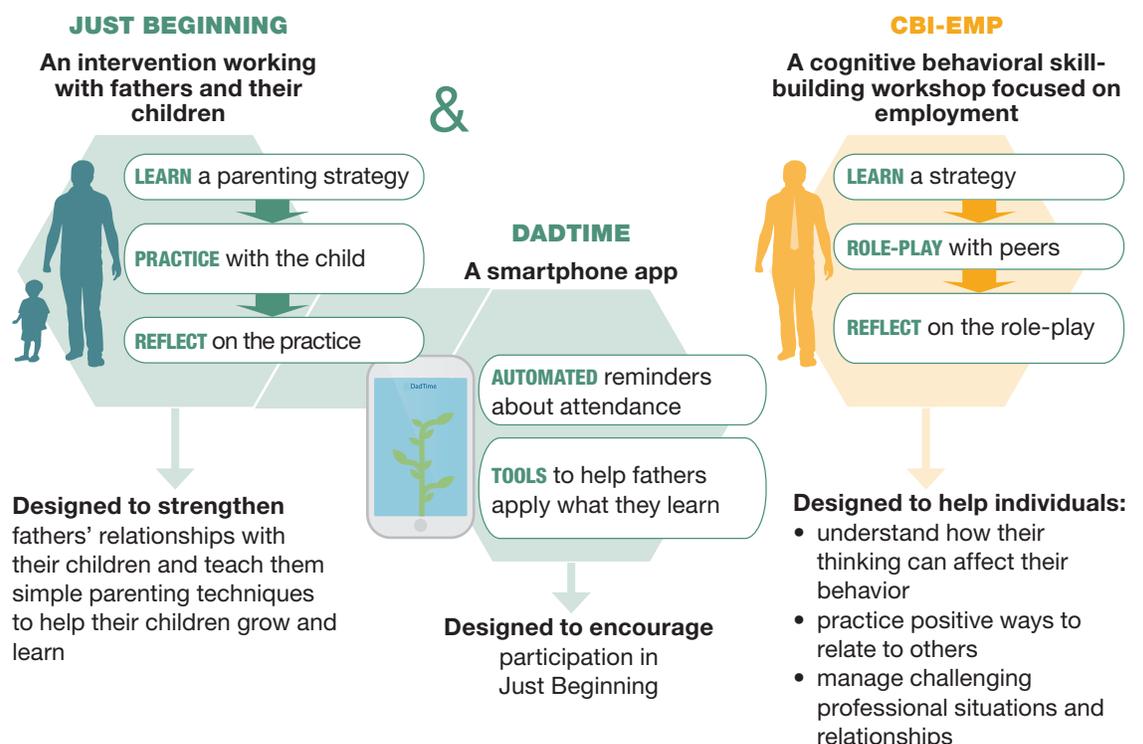
THREE INNOVATIVE INTERVENTIONS

The three interventions in the B3 study—Just Beginning, DadTime, and Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Justice-Involved Individuals Seeking Employment (CBI-Emp)— were all interactive, and specifically designed for fathers or men.² Just Beginning aimed to improve fathers’ relationships with their children, DadTime was designed to boost their program participation, and CBI-Emp was meant to increase their employment and earnings. Each was offered along with other, existing services provided to fathers.

ABOUT B3

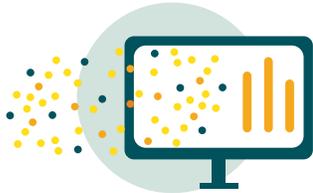
B3 is an MDRC-led collaboration among:

- Six organizations that provide Responsible Fatherhood services
- Researchers
- Model developers
- Training and technical assistance providers
- The project funder, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families



RESEARCH METHODS PAIRED WITH TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

The B3 study mixed a randomized controlled trial with other research methods to assess whether it was possible to add these new interventions to existing services, and if so, how well they worked. MDRC and its partners provided technical assistance throughout the study period to help programs implement the interventions. Read more about the study design [here](#).



Mixed-Methods Implementation Analysis



Impact Analysis



Investments in Staff



Support for Fathers

This part of the evaluation investigated how each intervention operated and what fathers and staff members thought of it. Researchers did interviews, observed services, surveyed staff members online, and sent text-message surveys to small numbers of fathers with different levels of program participation. They also drew on program attendance and financial data (on the costs of supplies, technical assistance, training, incentives, and other expenses).

This part of the evaluation was based on randomized controlled trials conducted from 2016 to 2019. Fathers were randomly assigned either to a program group (who got usual services plus the innovative intervention) or to a services-as-usual group. Comparing the two groups' outcomes shows whether the interventions were more effective than the usual services. The studies draw on program participation data, responses fathers provided in surveys, and existing records collected by state and federal agencies.³

Curriculum developers trained staff members and gave them remote and in-person coaching to help them deliver each intervention as intended. Other than the training B3 provided, staff members did not need to have any specialized training or degrees. The B3 technical assistance team also collaborated with managers to solve challenges and to make it easier for staff members to learn from each other, setting up a peer learning community and helping programs share data.

Fathers participating in B3 interventions received gift cards and other, in-kind forms of support for reaching certain milestones. Fathers were also offered gift cards for sharing information with the study team at various times during the study.

The authors would like to express our sincerest appreciation to the dedicated staff members in the organizations that participated in B3 study of CBI-Emp—The Fortune Society, Passages, Inc., and Kanawha Institute for Social Research and Action (KISRA)—and the organizations that participated in the study of Just Beginning and DadTime—Children's Institute, People for People, Inc., and Seedco and their community partners BronxWorks and Strive.

The findings and conclusions in this report do not necessarily represent the official positions or policies of the funders.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Israel, Dina A. R., Michelle S. Manno, Leah Jacobson. 2021. *Testing Innovations with Fatherhood Programs: A Roundup of Findings from the Building Bridges and Bonds Study*. OPRE Report 2021-163. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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Contract Number: HHS-P23320095644WC
OPRE Report 2021-163
September 2021

1 JUST BEGINNING—LESSONS LEARNED

A Parenting Intervention with Children

THE QUESTION

Does adding a five-session intervention that involves fathers and their young children strengthen father-child relationships? Does involving other family members besides fathers themselves (“coparents”) make it easier for fathers to engage with the program? Read more about the approach [here](#).

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Just Beginning was implemented by three community-based organizations in New York City, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia. A sample of 738 fathers enrolled in the study, with 370 in the program group and 368 in the services-as-usual group. Read more about the study design [here](#).

THE INVESTMENT IN STAFF

Staff members got in-person training from the study team and the curriculum developers, and then were certified to lead workshops based on videorecorded practice sessions. After that, curriculum developers mainly reviewed videos of sessions and provided videoconference coaching. Regular videoconference calls fostered peer support.

SUPPORT FOR FATHERS

Fathers in Just Beginning had access to a child-friendly play space. They also received a monetary incentive and toys related to session topics.

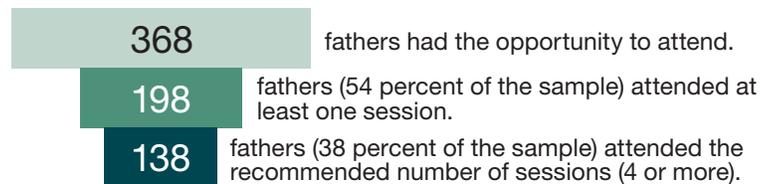
See this [infographic](#) to learn more about the strategies that organizations in B3 used to sustain father engagement in Responsible Fatherhood programs.

IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

- Because Just Beginning targeted fathers with young children, most fathers served by fatherhood programs (who did not have young children) were ineligible for the study.
- Many fathers in the sample already had close relationships with their children. At the time of study enrollment:



- Three quite different organizations were able to add Just Beginning to existing services without reducing participation in those services.
- Over one-quarter of program group fathers had a coparent participate in an orientation.
- Fewer than half of program group fathers attended the recommended number of sessions. Read about Just Beginning implementation [here](#).



IMPACT FINDINGS

- ✗ **Father-child relationship quality**
 - ✗ **Fathers' parenting confidence**
 - ✗ **Levels of father-child contact**
- Just Beginning did not have statistically significant effects on these outcomes, according to data reported by fathers.

These results may be explained by several factors. First, there wasn't much room for improvement, as many fathers had close relationships with their children when the study began, as shown above. Second, fewer than half of fathers in the program group received the recommended number of sessions. Finally, the version of the curriculum used in the study had only five sessions, which meant that fathers in B3 had fewer learning opportunities than fathers in previous studies.⁴

See the [final report about Just Beginning](#) for more details.

2 DADTIME—LESSONS LEARNED

Using a Smartphone App to Engage Fathers

THE QUESTION

Could a highly personalized smartphone app affect attendance at Just Beginning sessions? Read more about the approach [here](#).

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

For this small-scale, exploratory study, 245 fathers in the Just Beginning program group were part of a second random assignment step to receive DadTime content either while they were in Just Beginning (Full DadTime group) or after Just Beginning was over (Partial DadTime group). Of those, 224 fathers (91 percent of all fathers) reported having a smartphone; 117 in the Full DadTime group and 107 in the Partial DadTime group.

THE INVESTMENT IN STAFF

The study team worked with Just Beginning developers, the staffs of participating B3 programs, and fathers to design the intervention.

Staff members were trained how to enter information about Just Beginning session schedules into the web-based DadTime system, which was maintained separately from each program's management information system. The study team coached staff members on ways to encourage app participation, for example by showing fathers how to use the app.

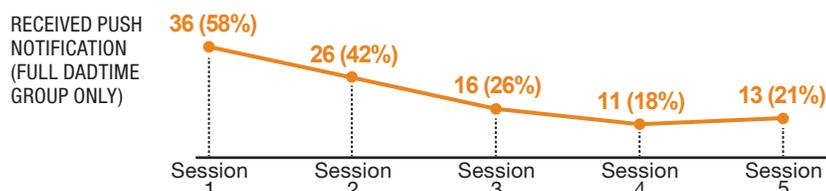
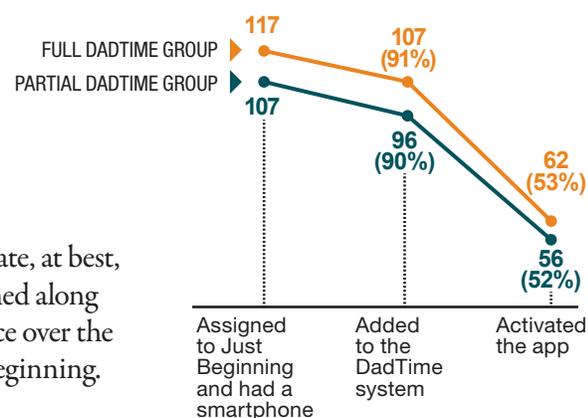
SUPPORT FOR FATHERS

Fathers could personalize the app with pictures of their children and contact information for coparents, and could choose when they received reminders about upcoming sessions. They also got prompts for reflections after sessions and ideas for weekend activities.

See this [brief](#) for more information about the development process.

IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

- Program staff members played an essential role in installing and activating DadTime on fathers' phones. Activation was typically scheduled at the end of a long program intake process.
- It was time-consuming for staff members to update Just Beginning session schedules in the web-based DadTime system. As a result, fathers with the app did not always get reminders, content, or planning tools.
- Almost 50 percent of fathers did not activate the app, so they did not have access to its features.
- App usage was moderate, at best, for all users and declined along with session attendance over the fathers' time in Just Beginning.



IMPACT FINDINGS

- ✗ **Attendance** ▶ There was no evidence that the app improved attendance.
- ✗ **Participation** ▶ Fathers offered full DadTime access during Just Beginning were less likely to participate and completed fewer Just Beginning sessions than their peers who received access to the app content after the Just Beginning sessions were completed.

There was no clear pattern pointing to a mechanism by which the app could have decreased attendance. Lower Just Beginning participation seems to be concentrated among fathers who never activated the app and thus did not have any exposure to DadTime.

See the [final report about DadTime](#) for more details.

3 CBI-EMP—LESSONS LEARNED

A Cognitive Behavioral Skill-Building Supplement to an Employment Workshop

THE QUESTION

For fathers with a history of involvement in the criminal justice system, could a workshop about building cognitive behavioral skills for the workplace help them manage challenging employment and interpersonal experiences? Read more about the approach [here](#).

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

CBI-Emp was implemented by three community-based organizations in New York City, Cleveland, and West Virginia. A sample of 752 fathers enrolled in the B3 study, with 375 in the program group and 377 in the services-as-usual group.

THE INVESTMENT IN STAFF

Staff members got five days of in-person training. After that, the study team and curriculum developers supported staff members and supervisors with both in-person and videoconference coaching. The curriculum developer also observed videorecordings of workshop sessions. Regular videoconference calls fostered peer support.

SUPPORT FOR FATHERS

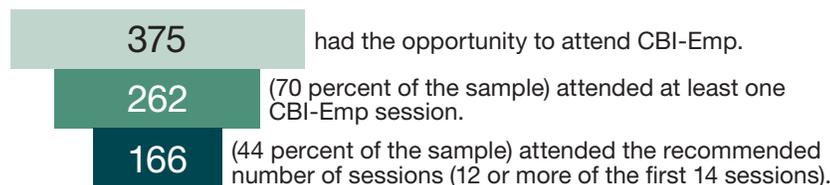
Fathers engaged in CBI-Emp received an additional monetary incentive as they reached intervention milestones.

IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

- CBI-Emp was designed for adult fathers who had been involved in the criminal justice system in the three years before study enrollment and who were at medium to high risk of rearrest, reincarceration, or parole violations in the coming six months.

Average Age	Incarceration History at Enrollment	Race/Ethnicity
38	48% released from incarceration within the six months before random assignment	71% Black 16% Hispanic < 10% White

- Three organizations with quite different structures were able to adapt a 20-session workshop curriculum to fit within their existing services without reducing participation in other services.
- Father participation:



- Fathers who were scheduled to begin services within two weeks of random assignment were more likely to attend a CBI-Emp session and were more likely to complete at least the recommended 12 sessions, compared with fathers who were not scheduled to start within two weeks.

Read more about CBI-Emp implementation [here](#).

IMPACT FINDINGS

- ✗ **Employment**
 - ✗ **Criminal justice system involvement**
 - ✗ **Relationships with coparents**
- ▶ CBI-Emp did not have statistically significant effects on these outcomes, according to data reported by fathers and from state and federal agencies.

Participation was strongest among fathers enrolled at the New York City-based program. Fathers in this program also showed larger effects on measures of employment and involvement in the criminal justice system than fathers at the other program locations.

See the [final report about CBI-Emp](#) for more details.

IN CONCLUSION

B3 built on emerging innovations and evidence in the fatherhood field about what fathers may want and need from community-based programs. It offers several overall lessons:

Offering additional services within existing fatherhood programs is feasible, though difficult.

Just Beginning and CBI-Emp required staff members to learn new techniques to lead workshops and fathers to engage with more services than usual. While staff members were able to implement efforts to increase engagement, a low proportion of fathers ultimately attended the recommended number of sessions. DadTime also offers a cautionary tale: It asked staff members to do additional data entry, and they were not always able to.

Fathers will engage in a new curriculum that they did not seek out.

Fathers did not have to express interest in Just Beginning or CBI-Emp to be included in the study, yet programs did get many fathers to participate in one or more sessions.

Investments in staff professional development supports the successful implementation of new program components.

Change can be hard, and often, training provided once is not enough to ensure staff members apply new concepts and procedures in their daily work. B3 enhanced traditional staff training with ongoing coaching and video reviews from curriculum developers.

Not all interventions are appropriate and effective for all fathers.

The lack of impact findings for Just Beginning and CBI-Emp suggest that these interventions may not be appropriate and effective for all fathers. Targeting a more specific group of fathers may yield better outcomes.

- CBI-Emp might work better with fathers at a higher risk of future involvement with the criminal justice system: those who are younger or more recently released from incarceration.
- Fathers in the Just Beginning study had good relationships with their children, on average, when they enrolled. Just Beginning might work better for fathers who did not already have such good relationships, for example, fathers who have supervised visitation (meaning they can see their children only with the coparent or another approved adult present).

RESOURCES FOR PRACTITIONERS

While the goal of the B3 study was to reveal how these interventions affected fathers, the B3 study team also identified other lessons that individuals working with or studying programs that serve fathers may find valuable:

- Strategies that may be useful for engaging fathers in services are available [here](#).
- Ways programs can use data to guide program implementation and improvement are available [here](#).
- Benefits of and strategies for using text messages to learn about participants' experiences are available [here](#).
- Resources to help programs identify and implement new service components are available [here](#).

NOTES

- ¹ Since the launch of the B3 study, another evaluation of Responsible Fatherhood programs—the Parents and Children Together evaluation—reported positive evidence. See Sarah Avellar, Reginald Covington, Quinn Moore, Ankita Patnaik, and April Wu, *Parents and Children Together: Effects of Four Responsible Fatherhood Programs for Low-Income Fathers*, OPRE Report Number 2018-50 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018).
- ² In contrast to other parenting programs used more with mothers.
- ³ For Just Beginning, the analyses relied on a survey of fathers six months after they enrolled in the study. DadTime analyses drew on program participation data. CBI-Emp analyses involved administrative records of employment and involvement in the justice system, in addition to a survey of fathers six months after enrollment.
- ⁴ The number of sessions was reduced from 10 to 5 before the B3 study. This adjustment was made to address the practical challenge of getting fathers to attend 10 sessions in a reasonable time frame. See Rachel Barr, Natalie Brito, Jaelyn Zocca, Samantha Reina, Jennifer Rodriguez, and Carole Shauffer, “The Baby Elmo Program: Improving Teen Father-Child Interactions Within Juvenile Justice Facilities,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 33, 9 (2011): 1,555–1,562; Rachel Barr, Marisa Morin, Natalie Brito, Benjamin Richeda, Jennifer Rodriguez, and Carole Shauffer, “Delivering Services to Incarcerated Teen Fathers: A Pilot Intervention to Increase the Quality of Father-Infant Interactions During Visitation,” *Psychological Services* 11, 1 (2014): 10–21.