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What Strategies Can Programs Use to Help More Dads Participate in Fatherhood Services?

By Emily Marano, Dina Israel, and Diego Quezada

In many U.S. communities, fathers have access to a broad range of services.¹ However, competing demands often prevent them from using or taking full advantage of these services even though they might benefit from participation. In those cases, program operators might gather what they know about fathers' motivations and concerns and work with colleagues to address them.

In 2020, MDRC and its partners conducted a literature scan and held a series of conversations on this topic with practitioners, fathers, researchers, policymakers, and other subject matter experts.² This publication summarizes engagement approaches practitioners have tried or are considering.³ These promising approaches are organized by the four main reasons fathers say they are unable to attend services.

The approaches are divided into two categories: those that staff members can try inside a program and those they can direct toward or that involve external audiences, such as other organizations in a community.

What Fathers May Say About Not Attending Services

- I am not interested.
- I do not think the program is right for me.
- I have unmet basic needs.
- I have other relationships or commitments to attend to.

“I am not interested.”

TRY THESE PROMISING APPROACHES

CHALLENGE	Inside program	Outside program
Distrust of programs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ ● Focus on opportunities, not barriers. ● Let fathers observe before enrolling. ● Build program intensity, using short interactions to establish relationships. ● Hire staff members who know the language and culture of the fathers. ● Provide content in fathers’ native languages. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Find a trusted community member or resource to build a partnership with or incorporate in marketing and testimonials. ● Participate in community events or cohost events. ● Spend time at places in the community where fathers congregate (for example, barbershops).
Feeling misunderstood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ ● Train staff members to be aware of and confront their implicit and explicit biases related to racial and gender stereotypes, young parents, and criminal justice involvement. ● Tailor messages and content to fathers’ needs and preferences. ● Train staff members to maintain a calm demeanor if a father has an emotional reaction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Host listening sessions with fathers in the community. ● Build in time for staff members to tour, observe, or participate in experiences outside the program that build their understanding of or relationships with fathers.
Fear of discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ ● Before they engage with fathers, allow staff members time to reflect on race and different cultural contexts, including their own, and how they influence relationships. ● Collaborate with fathers and staff members from varied backgrounds to develop messages. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Engage with community leaders and media to understand perceptions of fathers and to shift views and expectations of them.
View that fathers are providers, not caregivers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ ● Provide messages about the role of a father and its intersection with other roles men have. ● Host group activities for fathers and children. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Arrange for fathers to give presentations at community forums.
View of the program as punitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ ● Focus on the importance of fathers and combat the stigma that the program is for men in trouble. ● Integrate nonpunitive approaches into program policies and train staff members to implement them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learn more about how people’s perception of fairness and how they are treated by social service and legal systems may affect how they respond to your program.

“I do not think the program is right for me.”

TRY THESE PROMISING APPROACHES

CHALLENGE	Inside the program	Outside the program
Lack of interest in program topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus messages on outcomes, not services. Integrate services or change the order of topics based on fathers’ reactions. Target fathers at life milestones so they see the program’s relevance. Ensure materials are adapted for your community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer referral partners an outline or a copy of the curriculum so they can help set expectations. Conduct recruitment through participants, employers, alumni, or children’s other parents or caregivers.
Apprehension about other program participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask about long- and short-term goals to identify connections across peers. To build camaraderie, provide matching shirts for the group. Follow up after emotional discussions. Write group goals together, and revisit them at the start of each session. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Learn about participants’ neighborhoods so you can understand their relationships outside of the program.
Numerous requests for information from the program	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explain why information is being collected and how it will be used. Simplify and personalize materials. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tell funders and evaluators how long it takes fathers to complete information forms, and discuss plans to reduce that burden.
Location unappealing for fathers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make the space into a welcoming community center where fathers can socialize and participate in activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Locate services at places fathers already visit (for example, a military base or a community college).
Staff members who may not be relatable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hire facilitators fathers can relate to. Try different people in the role of making a positive first impression. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invite alumni to events.
Competing demands on time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Try different times of day and durations. Create a video that describes how a father fit the program into his life and how it helped him. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help referral partners communicate the time commitment involved. Work with partners to coordinate schedules.
Staff members not being prepared to meet fathers’ specific needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Define goals, milestones, benchmarks, and communication plans with the staff. Celebrate successes and give staff members agency in affecting measures and improvement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer opportunities for staff members to observe others in similar positions or working with similar populations. Include training for community partners that interact with fathers.

“I have unmet basic needs.”

TRY THESE PROMISING APPROACHES

CHALLENGE	Inside the program	Outside the program
Lack of affordable housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bring in a representative from housing assistance. Hire a housing resource specialist. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refer fathers to housing assistance.
Difficulty with transportation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide gas cards and transit passes. Offer services where participants have ready access to them. Explain how to get to the program site. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner with a car-services provider or a community ride-sharing program.
Lack of stable, gainful employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emphasize employment outcomes. Schedule fathers in free, accredited training during enrollment. Frame incentives or program support as help to offset expenses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connect fathers to workforce development services, nonprofit providers, etc. Partner with local businesses looking to hire workers right away.
Physical health, mental health, substance use disorders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assess for and discuss challenges at enrollment. Educate staff members about health providers and insurance options that they can discuss with fathers. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Refer fathers to services and provide coordination to connect fathers to resources.
Unpaid child support resulting in debt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Invite a child support representative to visit regularly or present a workshop session. Discuss emotions related to child support and budgeting practicalities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advertise the benefits of your program to child support staff members. Track which ones refer fathers. Partner with child support to set up child support-related incentives.
Desire for more parenting time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Include children in services. Role-play visitation conversations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Find a service partner that helps parents establish visitation schedules.
Probation or parole	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do mock job interviews with questions on involvement in the justice system. Conduct a needs assessment for fathers reentering the community after incarceration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work with parole/probation officers to resolve scheduling conflicts.
Multiple barriers to navigating services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use peers to help fathers navigate the program. Provide a list of recommended community service providers. Use coaching to help participants set and achieve goals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify community events staff members and fathers can attend. Develop ways staff members can connect fathers with community partners.

“I have other relationships or commitments to attend to.”

TRY THESE PROMISING APPROACHES

CHALLENGE	Inside the program	Outside the program
Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide services at multiple times. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner with an employer to offer on-site services for employees, or services as part of a benefits package.
School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adjust program length and times so services can coincide with school breaks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate with area schools to accommodate student schedules. Offer services in school common rooms.
Schedule changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask about other commitments and troubleshoot challenges. • Have a policy for make-up sessions and excused absences. • Use personalized, responsive incentives. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner with agencies in the community to offer your curriculum in other locations convenient to fathers.
Legal challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a staff attorney on-site. • Invite a lawyer, judge, or peer with experience to provide legal education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the legal support landscape in your community. • Find a partner that will accept referrals of fathers with legal issues.
Fractured relationship with a child’s other parent or caregiver (coparent)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize how healthy relationships improve parenting. • Host a listening session where coparents can learn about the program and share their own perspectives. • Offer fathers child-related incentives: toys, diapers, or formula. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage other organizations to help provide services to children and coparents. • Create a separate program for coparents, or include them in services.
Difficulty finding childcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a child-friendly play space. • Offer childcare or a kid activity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a partnership with a provider that can provide childcare. • Add childcare providers as referral partners.
Living situation (for example, jail or an addiction treatment center)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer to share space or coordinate activities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partner with facilities to offer services before or after fathers reenter the community. • Invite staff members from facilities to tour and observe services.

NOTES

- 1 For example, the Fatherhood – Family-focused, Interconnected, Resilient, and Essential (Fatherhood FIRE) grant program in the Office of Family Assistance of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services funds projects that integrate robust economic stability services, healthy marriage education, and activities designed to foster responsible parenting. For more information, see Office of Family Assistance, “Healthy Marriage & Responsible Fatherhood” (website: www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/healthy-marriage-responsible-fatherhood, 2020). The promising approaches outlined in this brief reflect the insights of programs and do not necessarily account for allowable uses of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grant funds.
- 2 MDRC’s Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF) is sponsored by the Office of Family Assistance and overseen by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. MDRC is working with MEF Associates and Insight Policy Research to conduct SIRF.
- 3 For more information on the SIRF study design, see Charles Michalopoulos, Rebecca Behrmann, and Michelle S. Manno, [*Using Learning Cycles to Strengthen Fatherhood Programs: An Introduction to the Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs \(SIRF\) Study*](#), OPRE Report 2022-62 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

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