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Fostering Trust with Program Participants and Serving Young Fathers: Highlights from the Third FRAMING Research Technical Work Group on Responsible Fatherhood

Responsible fatherhood (RF) programs aim to enhance fathers' parenting skills, relationship skills, and economic stability to support their engagement in and positive influence on their children's lives (Office of Family Assistance 2021). Since the inception of RF programs in the early 2000s, Congress has dedicated substantial funding for these programs through competitive, multiyear grants administered by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) (U.S. Congress 2010; ACF 2020). OFA also partners with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in ACF to build the evidence base to strengthen RF programming (OFA 2021). In 2018, ACF undertook the Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage—Illuminating the Next

Generation of Research (FRAMING Research) project to systematically identify current gaps in the knowledge base for RF programming and healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programming (OPRE n.d.).

The current phase of the FRAMING Research project focuses on two distinct challenges that RF programs commonly face. The first is building trust with fathers and reducing fathers' skepticism of RF services. Many fathers have feelings of mistrust that might affect their willingness to seek help from community agencies or government systems (Clary et al. 2017; Holcomb et al. 2015). If RF programs cannot successfully recruit and engage fathers because of mistrust, programs are unlikely to have their intended effects. A second challenge for RF programs is that young fathers—that



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About the FRAMING Research project

This work is part of the FRAMING Research project, sponsored by the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Administration for Children and Families has partnered with Mathematica and its subcontractor Public Strategies to conduct the FRAMING Research project. The project team is gathering and synthesizing information through literature reviews, knowledge mapping, expert consultations, and a series of technical work groups focused on healthy marriage and relationship education or responsible fatherhood programming. The project team is also drafting a series of white papers to explore key topics that emerge during the project related to healthy marriage and relationship education programming and responsible fatherhood programming.

is, fathers younger than age 30—can be difficult to recruit and engage, despite potentially having a lot to gain from these programs (Avellar et al. 2021).

To further explore these two common challenges, ACF convened a technical work group (TWG) as part of the FRAMING Research project. This TWG was the third in a series convened by the project to discuss issues related to research on RF programs. In this brief, we describe the meeting of the TWG and highlight key themes and research priorities identified by the group.



THE THIRD FRAMING RESEARCH RF TECHNICAL WORK GROUP

The third RF TWG for the FRAMING Research project met in July 2022. The five and a half hour meeting occurred remotely via videoconference. The group included seven individuals, including both researchers and practitioners, with expertise related to RF programming and serving young fathers (Figure 1). ACF convened the group to gather input on future research related to building trust with potential RF program participants and serving young fathers in RF programs. These topics emerged as gaps in the field’s understanding of RF programs after the FRAMING Research team reviewed relevant literature and held discussions with experts in the field and ACF about agency priorities. This brief highlights key points from the meeting; it does not cover all comments made by members of the work group.



FOSTERING TRUST AMONG RF PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Establishing a sense of trust with program participants can positively influence how receptive they are to services and how they interact with staff and other participants. In RF programs, creating a trusting environment can help fathers feel safe and want to return class after class (Brennan et al. 2021; Holcomb et al. 2019). However, some fathers enrolled in RF programs have described feeling “system shy,” or lacking trust in social services or government systems (Clary et al. 2017; Holcomb et al. 2015). These feelings can stem from several sources, including historical events and trauma, discriminatory policies, or negative prior experiences with social services (Sotero, 2006). For example, fathers who are undocumented immigrants might have strong feelings of mistrust toward federal programs because of language barriers or fear of deportation (Benito-Gomez and Flores Rojas 2020; Sotero 2006). Likewise, community perceptions of new organizations and cultural factors around help-seeking behaviors can lead fathers to feel skeptical that RF services will meet their needs (Felkey & Graham 2022; Whaley 2001). RF programs cannot have their intended effects if the service population does not engage with them because of mistrust.

The first part of the TWG discussion focused on fostering trust with fathers and the communities served by RF programs. TWG members offered several suggestions during this part of the discussion:

- Building a trusting relationship can take various forms based on fathers’ characteristics. Factors such as age, race, culture, family background, and other lived experiences can influence fathers’ feelings of trust toward social services, including RF programs. As such, staff might need to employ a variety of strategies to build trusting relationships with fathers in their programs, paying attention to what resonates with various fathers. It might take more time to build trust with some fathers than others.

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- Inviting community members to advocate for the RF program can build fathers' trust. RF programs might want to consider engaging former participants as program ambassadors to help with recruitment efforts. As program ambassadors, fathers can serve as trustworthy figures and vouch for the RF program's services. Community leaders can also highlight the value of RF programs for potential participants.
 - Giving fathers the opportunity to develop trusting relationships with other fathers and program staff can create a positive environment that compels fathers to return week after week. Although fathers might appreciate financial incentives, the money they receive for participating in the program is typically not the main driver for continued program engagement and program completion. Rather, building a brotherhood among fathers and connections between fathers and program staff is often what keeps fathers in the program.
 - RF program staff might benefit from direct training on how to build trust with fathers. In particular, staff who do not share fathers' lived experiences, such as staff who are female or who do not have children, might need additional training to learn how to connect with fathers. Strategies such as role-playing or engaging with fathers outside of the RF program environment could help staff acknowledge and reject biases they might have toward fathers and connect with each father as an individual. In addition, staff should be trained on how to carry out program procedures in ways that promote trust. For example, program staff should be ready to respond quickly whenever participants or potential participants reach out with questions. Not hearing back from the program in a timely manner can quickly erode fathers' trust.
 - Developing trusted partnerships with other organizations in the community can help RF programs attract potential participants. When considering potential partnerships, RF programs need to be aware of how the mission and goals of other organizations align with their own, and they need to consider the reputation of other organizations in the community. If there is misalignment, or if an organization has a poor reputation in the community, the partnership might diminish fathers' perception of the RF program rather than enhance it.
 - Honesty is key in all trusting relationships. To build trust with fathers and other organizations in the community, RF programs need to be clear about what they can offer and who will benefit most from their services. Making promises they cannot keep will erode fathers' sense of trust in the program, and this mistrust can quickly spread to other fathers and community organizations.



SERVING YOUNG FATHERS IN RF PROGRAMS

RF programs tend to be more successful enrolling and engaging older fathers (that is, fathers in their 30s and older) than younger fathers (that is, fathers younger than 30) (Avellar et al. 2021). This could be, in part, because young fathers might have not yet experienced the prolonged challenges and systemic barriers that may drive many older fathers to participate in RF programs, such as having to navigate the child support system or a contentious co-parenting relationship with a former romantic partner. However, young fathers potentially have a lot to gain from participating in RF programs. Fathers who are in a committed relationship and live with their children's mother tend to be more actively engaged in their children's lives (Palkovitz et al., 2013). Young fathers might be able to use the relationship and co-parenting skills taught by RF programs to

maintain a healthy relationship with their children's mother, and to prevent future family instability (Robbers 2009). As a result, they may have an easier time applying the parenting skills taught by RF programs in their relationships with their children. In addition, young fathers tend to be less financially secure than older fathers and thus might benefit more from the economic stability services RF programs offer (Smeeding et al. 2011; Buston et al. 2018; Davies et al. 2016).

The second part of the TWG discussion focused on challenges associated with serving young fathers. TWG members noted the following during this part of the discussion:

- It is important for RF programs to offer services to young fathers that are developmentally appropriate. Young fathers have different developmental needs than older fathers. Many are still grappling with the transition to adulthood in tandem with the transition to parenthood. For example, fathers in their teens and 20s might not be ready to be financially responsible for their entire family. To make content on employment more relevant for younger fathers, programs might want to emphasize helping fathers find their first job or training opportunities in a future field.
- To attract more young fathers, RF programs might need to adapt some of their approaches to recruitment and service delivery. For example, programs might need to rely more on social media to recruit young fathers and keep them engaged. In addition, young fathers might dislike a lecture-style format and might respond better to a more conversational or interactive approach to delivering program content.
- Programs might want to consider hosting separate workshops for younger and older fathers, rather than serving them together. When younger and older fathers are in workshops together, older fathers might overshadow the conversation in an attempt to share their wisdom. However, this can limit young fathers' opportunities to speak about their experiences. Having separate workshops for younger fathers could afford them space to grow and learn for themselves. Serving young fathers separately would also help programs tailor their content and approach to service delivery.
- Cultural and societal norms historically might have led fathers to feel that they did not have as much to offer their children during the early years of infancy and toddlerhood. However, young fathers today may be more open to dispelling gender stereotypes and embracing nurturing and caregiving roles, including caring for young children. Further, evidence shows that fathers' involvement when their children are infants tends to lead to increased involvement when their children are older (Cabrera, Fagan, & Farrie, 2008; Tamis-LeMonda, Kahana-Kalman, & Yoshikawa, 2009). RF programs should capitalize on this possible cultural shift and further emphasize the important roles young fathers can play in the lives of their children at every stage of development.



FUTURE RF RESEARCH PRIORITIES

The TWG meeting included a brainstorming session about priority research questions and evaluation ideas related to building trust and serving young fathers. TWG members met in small groups to develop ideas. They then shared the ideas with the full group to provide feedback and develop a set of priorities.

Develop a conceptual model for building trust between programs and fathers

TWG members noted the importance of understanding the ecosystem of trust that surrounds RF programs. In other words, research should aim to identify the most relevant factors—including those external to programs and those within programs' control—that influence the formation of trust between RF programs and participants. External factors might include current and historical events, racism and discrimination, media influences (for example, spreading misinformation), or government policies (for example, strict policies of child support enforcement). Factors within programs' control might include the level of communication with participants (for example, how quickly programs follow up with participants), hiring culturally competent staff, or actively working to create a safe space for fathers to express themselves during workshop sessions.

To develop this conceptual model, researchers could identify relevant factors, how they are interconnected, and how trust influences outcomes. To identify factors and the connections between them, researchers could review current research on building trust and interview program leaders, staff, and participants to learn from their lived experiences. To identify how trust influences participants' outcomes, researchers could study the associations between fathers' trust in the program, program participation, and program outcomes. For example, fathers might be more engaged and invested in the program if they feel they can trust the program, staff, and other participants. This buy-in might result in greater retention of program content and a greater willingness to use the knowledge and skills in their everyday life; however, additional research is needed to explore these hypotheses.

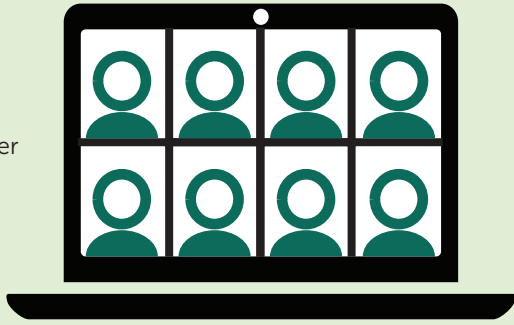
Engage community members in all aspects of the research process to build trust with research teams

Just as it is important for fathers to trust RF programs and the services they offer, it is also important for fathers to trust the research teams seeking to study RF programs. Engaging community members—including fathers, RF program providers, and other community leaders—in all phases of the research process can help build trust and ensure the research serves the needs of the community. However, strict project timelines and budgets can present hurdles to engaging community members. To help overcome these hurdles, researchers should reach out to community members long before the study begins. In addition, training community members, including fathers and program staff, to be actively engaged in the research process can help elevate fathers' voices and identify questions relevant to the communities that RF programs serve. In the long term, working to diversify the pipeline of new researchers will help research teams better represent underserved communities. For example, academic programs could broaden their acceptance criteria to consider applicants with relevant lived experience who may have non-traditional research backgrounds. Having research teams that are representative of the populations being studied is important for building trust between research teams and the community.

Gather evidence to better understand the needs of young fathers and how to serve them

TWG members highlighted the importance of uplifting the voices of young fathers to better understand their challenges related to parenting, what they would like to get out of RF programs, and how services could be adapted to best meet their needs. It would also be useful to learn about young fathers' broader social networks, including their relationships with their friends, parents, and children's mothers, and how these relationships influence fathers' identity as a parent. Researchers could gather this information through focus groups or interviews with fathers and program staff. Programs could use this information to assess how well their current program practices and content align with the motivations of young fathers, and then adjust their activities to better serve this population. Funders and policymakers could also use this research to determine whether current RF grant requirements adequately support the needs of young fathers.

Figure 1. FRAMING Research RF technical work group members



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Additional FRAMING Research technical work group meetings

In July 2022, the FRAMING Research project convened another TWG meeting focused on building trust with HMRE program participants and serving lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ+) youth in HMRE programs. A separate brief summarizes the themes from that meeting (Ouellette and Alamillo 2023). The FRAMING Research project also hosted HMRE and RF TWG meetings in 2019 and 2020. Four additional briefs summarize the themes from those meetings (Alamillo and Ouellette 2021a; Alamillo and Ouellette 2021b; Avellar et al. 2020; Wood 2020).

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