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Figuring It Out: Serving Young Fathers in Responsible Fatherhood Programs

Responsible Fatherhood services—which focus on parenting, healthy relationships, and economic stability—might be relevant to many fathers, but relatively few young fathers participate in the programs. Young fathers—defined in this brief as those younger than 30—might be more likely than older fathers to be in regular contact with their children and in a relationship with the children’s mother, and could strengthen their parenting and co-parenting skills by participating in RF programs. The young fathers who are just entering the work force could benefit from knowledge and support provided by RF programs’ employment services. However, programs often have difficulty recruiting young fathers and keeping them engaged in services.

To help programs better reach young fathers, this brief highlights the common challenges programs face in recruiting and engaging young fathers and potential solutions to those challenges. Sources for the brief include (1) a review of the literature on serving young fathers in human services programs, and (2) discussions with staff and participants at two current RF programs that serve a relatively large proportion of young fathers. A separate white paper has more details on the methods and findings.¹



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 project focuses on gathering and summarizing information on healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood programming and connected areas, using literature reviews, knowledge maps, expert consultations, and technical work groups. The project team has drafted a range of products exploring key topics that emerged during the project.



COMMON CHALLENGES RELATED TO RECRUITING YOUNG FATHERS

Young fathers can be difficult to locate through traditional community partners. A central challenge in recruiting young fathers is finding them through community outreach and existing recruitment networks, despite this generally being an effective recruitment strategy for RF and similar programs. Young fathers are often disconnected from community resources and might be more difficult to physically locate.

Young fathers often mistrust services, perhaps due to negative experiences with other organizations or systems. Many young fathers express mistrust or disbelief when they learn about the program and what it offers. Fathers' feelings of mistrust or being "system shy" often stem from negative experiences interacting with other social service or community organizations that might have let them down or treated them badly in the past.

Young fathers might doubt they will benefit from RF services. Young men might be uncomfortable seeking or accepting support. They also might be unaccustomed to receiving parenting services, which most programs typically direct toward mothers. They also might already be confident in their parenting and relationship skills, and not see how the program could help strengthen those skills and make them an even better father.



POTENTIAL STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME RECRUITMENT CHALLENGES

Embed program staff in the community and recruit from the places that young people frequent. A strong community presence can reassure hesitant young fathers of the program's commitment and reputation. To connect with the community, programs can adopt several approaches:



Locate the program's office in the same area where community outreach and recruitment takes place to facilitate more frequent interaction between staff and potential participants.



Hire staff who are from the community.



Partner with community agencies that work with the same or a similar population.



Participate in community events to develop partnerships with other organizations and reach young fathers directly.

Use a range of recruitment sources and communication methods. Programs must vary their recruitment efforts to reach young fathers. Conducting outreach at a variety of sites that young fathers frequent—such as gyms, barbershops, and community centers—is critical. Similarly, programs should consider using multiple methods of communicating—such as in-person outreach and calling—and be sure to use texting as one of their approaches. The young fathers we spoke to said they were unlikely to respond by email or answer calls from a phone number they did not recognize. They recommended texting as the best way to reach them, especially if messages were short and to the point.

Engage past participants or program ambassadors in the recruitment process. To reach young fathers, program recruiters should also be young fathers; program graduates can be particularly effective. Staff or program ambassadors who have experienced similar challenges as the young fathers they hope to recruit can talk about how the program addressed those challenges and clearly highlight the benefits of the program.

Tailor the recruitment message to appeal to what young fathers need most, but do not overpromise what programs can offer. Staff should ask open-ended questions to learn more about fathers during recruitment so they can tailor the message to describe how the RF program can meet the specific needs expressed by young fathers. For example, many young fathers can experience unstable housing, such as couch-surfing, or have difficulty getting a place of their own. The young fathers we spoke with said getting help from program staff in getting their own apartment made a substantial difference in their lives. Program staff also stressed the importance of avoiding making promises during the recruitment period that the program cannot fulfill. Young men might find it difficult to recover from the disappointment caused by unfulfilled expectations from other programs.



“So, what I saw in the past with other organizations is they... say, ‘We’re going to do this, we’re going to do this, we’re going to help you with this,’ and they don’t help the guys. ... And, as a young dad, that’s hurtful... Because you’re fresh, you’re thinking, ‘My kids are going to be good from this, I’m going to be good from this, my family is going to be good.’”

– RF program recruiter



COMMON CHALLENGES RELATED TO ENGAGING YOUNG FATHERS IN SERVICES

Even after successfully recruiting young fathers, programs might still face challenges keeping those fathers engaged in services and making sure the program meets their needs.

Young fathers tend to have urgent needs (such as housing and transportation issues and custody battles) and often juggle competing priorities. Young fathers often face challenges meeting some of their basic needs, including not having stable housing or reliable transportation, which can make it difficult for them to attend services. Also, many of the program staff we spoke with noted the young fathers in their program often worked more than one job, had physically demanding jobs, or had nontraditional work schedules, leaving them too tired or unable to participate in services.

Many young fathers grapple with their identities as men and as fathers. Young fathers often are still trying to understand themselves and who they want to be as men. They also have the added pressure of navigating their identity as a father and their role as a parent. Staff said working with young fathers trying to figure out who they are and what they want to do was a very different process than serving more established fathers.

Young fathers might not be mentally or emotionally ready to participate in a fatherhood program. Young fathers’ maturity affects their ability to fully engage in services. Staff mentioned how young fathers’ brains are still developing, which can affect how they make decisions. One young father noted that people his age “... can’t even sit down for 30 minutes. So it’s like, you have to want to do it.”

Some topics covered in workshops might be less relevant to young fathers. Although the skills that are foundational to any fatherhood program—parenting, developing and maintaining relationships, and achieving financial stability—can apply to many stages of life, sometimes the topics discussed during workshop sessions are less relevant to young fathers. For example, young fathers often have babies and toddlers and so cannot immediately relate to parenting skills appropriate for older children.



“For an older dad, he’s more established most times. He kind of knows what he wants to do. He knows the route that he wants to go. For the younger dads, they’re still kind of figuring it out...”

– RF staff member

Young fathers might hesitate to open up during workshop sessions because of more recent past experiences in classroom settings. Fathers described how they expected the program to have more typical teacher–student dynamics, which reminded them too much of recent negative experiences in school. One father said, “It definitely felt like a classroom setting, [so] I sat quiet as a church mouse.” At first, they were cautious to speak up, until they recognized that the program encouraged a discussion-based approach rather than lecture.



“Now you’re shifting from thinking about yourself, you know, fresh 18, 19 and it’s me, me, me. Which is fine, it should be at that age. [But] now you’re trying to force your brain to switch into putting a child first or your co-parent first. And if nobody is telling you to ... lights don’t just turn on, on their own.”

– RF staff member



POTENTIAL STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME ENGAGEMENT CHALLENGES

Create a comfortable, inviting program culture that encourages young fathers’ contributions. For fathers to feel welcome and safe sharing their personal stories, program staff could use several approaches:



Create a welcoming environment.

This includes designing program materials with young men in mind, such as materials that feature pictures of young fathers; communicating directly with the father and not through a co-parent or female partner; and offering activities that appeal to young men, such as game nights with food.



Avoid stereotypes.

Staff who work with young fathers should be conscious of and strive to reduce biases—including their own—about young fathers, such as young fathers are irresponsible or do not want to be in their children’s lives.



Develop a broad conceptualization of fathers’ roles.

Program staff should empower fathers to develop their own definitions of good fathering, such as being a nurturing parent or providing financially.



Make space for young fathers’ voices and validate their experiences.

Staff should reassure young fathers that what they say is important and when they speak up they will be taken seriously, which can be a rare experience for them.



Call on young fathers during program sessions and ask them to talk about their children.

Calling on fathers by name and asking specific questions can encourage those who are initially hesitant to speak in the group. One program facilitator described his technique: “One thing I’ve noticed is everybody wants to talk about their kids.”

Encourage fathers to keep notes so they can reference information in the future when it becomes more relevant. Young fathers can return to their workshop materials after the classes have ended to review information that might have been less relevant at the time. For example, one father said, “They couldn’t help me at this moment, but I took all the notes and I got all the websites and stuff like that [for] when I’m ready...”

Enlist older men in the groups to act as mentors. Older fathers can offer young fathers hope and encouragement that their situations can improve, which is a message they might not hear otherwise. A staff member shared, “The older dads just offer that perspective of it’s going to be all right... Without that ... [it] can be a dark space trying to be a dad and someone’s telling you, you can’t be the type of dad you want to be.”

Modify existing services to accommodate young fathers. Staff frequently described how young fathers often need more intensive case management than older fathers. For example, one facilitator who also served as a case manager explained that older fathers often came to the program for a particular service, but many younger dads had multiple challenges, which he thought required more attention and “hand-holding.”



“These older men provide so much hope for the young dads in the program.... You can [hear from] another dad that’s been through the child support system, been through a custody battle, and they’re telling you like just hold on. It’s worth it.”

– RF program facilitator



CONCLUSION

Although enrolling and serving young fathers can be challenging, involving them in RF services is an opportunity to provide young fathers with the necessary knowledge and skills to thrive in their roles as fathers and men. For example, one staff member shared, “I think [it] is crucial [to catch] them early ... 19, when you’re fresh having a kid. You know, before you owe \$10,000 in child support, before she takes the kid away. Before you’re trying to fight to see your kid from another county.” Similarly, the young fathers we spoke with who had completed an RF program felt strongly that other young fathers would benefit. One father shared, “We’re kids ourselves, you know, we’re still young.... I feel like we just need this for guidance, to help us before our journey starts with the kids.” A better understanding of how to address young fathers’ needs can enable RF programs to reach more young fathers and help them achieve their personal and parenting goals.

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