

# How fatherhood programs support fathers' coparenting and romantic relationships

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## BACKGROUND

- Fathers, children, and their families can benefit from healthy relationships.
- Many fatherhood programs offer services that aim to improve relationship skills to support fathers' coparenting and romantic relationships.
- It is unclear how fatherhood programs design and deliver healthy relationship content, and whether this content is responsive to fathers' diverse relationship contexts and needs.
- Gaining a better understanding of current coparenting and romantic relationship services in fatherhood programs, as well as how fathers perceive and engage in those services, can help ensure that these programs are better equipped to support fathers' healthy relationships.

## STUDY GOALS

The Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads (CHaRMED) project is funded by OFA, overseen by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, and led by Child Trends. A qualitative study completed as part of this project aimed to:

- Better understand the approaches that fatherhood programs use to support fathers' healthy coparenting and romantic relationships.
- Explore fathers' perceptions of and needs around relationship programming.
- Examine whether and how programs respond to those needs.

## METHODS

- The CHaRMED team conducted semi-structured phone interviews with staff (24), fathers (36), and coparents (6) from nine fatherhood programs across the country.
- Interviews explored perceptions of coparenting and romantic relationship services, fathers' engagement in the services, and how fatherhood programs support, or could better support, fathers' coparenting and romantic relationships.
- The team coded interview transcripts in Dedoose software and developed themes through an iterative process, using a content analysis framework.

## FINDINGS

**Fatherhood programs support healthy relationships through multiple services and strategies.** These approaches include curriculum-based workshops, one-on-one support, referrals to supplemental services, and coparent and family engagement in workshops and in other activities outside of the program.

*“ [Relationships are] definitely a priority for us because we know that at the end of the day, if this father has truly learned things from us through our group sessions, through our one-on-one sessions, through our components of the program, through our engagement...they will be better providers to their children.”*

- Program Facilitator

**Fathers engage in healthy relationship content once they feel connected to the program.** Most fathers are not drawn initially to fatherhood programs because of a desire to improve their relationships, but ultimately find value in healthy relationship content. Staff stressed that intensive intake and engagement efforts up front are critical to gain fathers' trust and create excitement about the fatherhood program.

*“ Once [fathers] get there, they're ready to talk about things that interest them and that they are living through and going through right now.”*

- Program Director

**Safe group spaces invite discussions around healthy relationships.** Fathers spoke of the “brotherhood” that forms with others in their cohort. Staff play a critical role in creating a safe space, which allows for honest discussions and peer learning around relationships.

*“ [The facilitator] did a fabulous job of creating an environment where we're all here, we're all here for similar reasons, we're all here to get better. Let's use our experiences. Let's be brothers in this and let's just be real and open with each other.”*

-Father

**Staff and participants view healthy relationship content as relevant and useful for fathers' coparenting relationships.** Staff described a tendency for discussions about healthy relationships to focus more on coparenting than on romantic relationships, often due to challenges faced by fathers in their coparenting relationships. Both fathers and coparents reported learning useful skills that to address these challenges.

*“ We communicated before, but we weren't really opening up. You know what I'm saying? ... And by taking the [fatherhood program] course, we learned that we have to efficiently listen to each other so we can be open to listen to the children.”*

- Coparent

**Meaningful engagement of coparents in relationship programming is seen as beneficial, but with important tradeoffs and logistical challenges.** For fathers and staff, there is a distinct tension between the value of coparent involvement in fatherhood programming and the need to respect a fathers-only space. Programs also reported challenges to successfully engaging coparents in programming, particularly when coparents and fathers were no longer in romantic relationships.

*“ I feel like the way the discussions went, I really enjoyed them. I could give [other fathers] my opinion without being worried... Don't take that away from me.”*

-Father

**Fathers see access to children as a key challenge in their lives, which is complicated by challenging coparenting relationships and by legal and social systems.** Some fathers described contentious coparenting relationships and legal and social systems as important factors that influence their ability to see their children and maintain relationships with them.

*“ I don't even get to coparent, that's what I'm saying. I go to court next month, and I don't even, haven't even seen my kids.”*

-Father

## Program Characteristics



Programs were located in **four regions across the United States**, including Midwest (3), South (3), West (2) and Mid-Atlantic and Northeast (1).



Programs served fathers from with a **variety of racial and ethnic identities** including majority Black (3), majority White (3), majority Hispanic or Latinx (2), and majority American Indian or Alaska Native (1).



5 programs operated in **urban settings**, two operated in **rural settings**, and two operated in both urban and rural settings.



6 programs **received funding** through **Responsible Fatherhood grants**.



7 programs **engaged coparents or spouses** in the fatherhood programs in some way.

## Fathers' Family and Relationship Characteristics



The majority of fathers were either **not currently in a romantic relationship (40%) or married (31%)** at the time of the interview.



Most fathers reported **having 1-2 minor children (63%)**; Nearly one quarter of fathers reported having **3-4 children (23%)**.



Over half of the fathers reported **coparenting minor children with one mother (56%)**; over a third reported **coparenting minor children with two or more mothers (36%)**.



One third of fathers reported that **all of their children lived with them all or most of the time (34%)** while another third were **living apart from all of their children (34%)**.

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