

Lessons Learned from the COVID-19 Pandemic for Supporting Fathers' Relationships in Fatherhood Programs

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► Introduction

Healthy relationships—including healthy coparenting and romantic relationships—are critical to ensuring the health and well-being of fathers and families. Because high-quality relationships with coparents or romantic partners are positively linked with fathers' mental health and involvement with their children,^{1,2,3,4} many fatherhood programs consider supporting fathers' coparenting and romantic relationships as a key goal of programming, in addition to building skills in parenting and economic self-sufficiency. These programs offer a variety of services to promote fathers' healthy relationships, including in-person, curriculum-based workshops and one-on-one case management.⁵

The COVID-19 pandemic presented many obstacles for fathers that may affect their romantic and coparenting relationships, including increased unemployment, issues around child access and visitation, and difficulties navigating work-from-home arrangements.^{6,7,8} These challenges and their impacts may be especially salient for fathers participating in fatherhood programs, as many are members of communities and populations that disproportionately bear the burden of the pandemic.^{9,10,11}

The pandemic also created unique hurdles for fatherhood programs in providing services to fathers. In particular, many of these programs were required to swiftly shift from in-person to virtual settings to deliver services.^{12,13,14} This change may hold particular implications for the relationship programming and services delivered by fatherhood programs. Discussions around relationships often require trust and comfort among fathers, and between fathers and program facilitators, which may be fostered through in-person interactions.⁵

The challenges faced by fathers and fatherhood programs, and the ways in which programs have adapted, have the potential to inform how fatherhood programs can better support fathers' healthy relationships moving forward. This brief describes how COVID-19 has affected fathers' relationships and healthy relationship programming provided by fatherhood programs and offers strategies that fatherhood programs can adopt to better support fathers' coparenting and romantic relationships.

The information in this brief is based on interviews with 36 fathers, 6 coparents, and 20 program staff at nine fatherhood programs across the United States, conducted as part of the Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads (CHaRMED) study. The CHaRMED study aimed to better understand the approaches that fatherhood programs use, or could use, to support fathers' healthy romantic and coparenting relationships. Because the study timing overlapped with the COVID-19 pandemic, the study team added questions specific to the pandemic after the first month of data collection to help contextualize results and explore lessons learned.

Overview of the CHaRMED Study and Sample

Child Trends conducted the Coparenting and Healthy Relationship and Marriage Education for Dads (CHaRMED) study from March 2020 through December 2020. This qualitative study aimed to better understand:

- ▶ The approaches fatherhood programs use to support fathers' healthy romantic and coparenting relationships
- ▶ Fathers' perceptions of and needs around relationship programming
- ▶ Whether and how programs respond to those needs

To examine these objectives, Child Trends conducted interviews with 24 staff members, 36 fathers, and six coparents of fathers from nine fatherhood programs across the United States. Programs were selected for participation based on various characteristics, including geographic location, source of funding, and populations served. Study interviews explored a range of topics related to relationship programming and fathers' relationship needs.

The CHaRMED study was funded by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and overseen by the ACF Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE). For more information on study participants, methods, and publications, visit the [CHaRMED webpage](#).

▶ COVID-19 Affected Fathers' Employment, Access to Their Children, and Their Relationships

Many fathers faced economic and employment stressors, which may have affected their relationships. Across fatherhood programs, fathers and their coparents spoke often of unemployment and financial challenges caused by the pandemic. Likewise, many program staff reported that a large part of programming during COVID-19 was necessarily focused on supporting fathers' immediate needs related to employment. These staff described the way this stressor had far-reaching implications for fathers, and how relationships can suffer when a father's basic needs are not met.

“ I'm not working. I'm on unemployment. I don't have any structure for my day, which is really important.” – **Father**

“ And the stress, the financial stress, obviously, in the home ... Obviously, we've all seen that. That many people have lost their jobs. And now, that creates stress on these romantic relationships and relationships in coparenting.” – **Program Staff**

“ [One father] lost his job because of COVID, and now his wife, or his child's mother, wanted him to leave. He had a job, and he was working. He had just come home [from prison]. He was moving kind of quick, and he got a nice job, and he'd been working the job for one month before his job shut down. And so now he's calling me and telling me that his child's mother wanted him to leave because he's no longer contributing to the household.” – **Program Staff**

Most fathers and coparents felt that their coparenting and romantic relationships were unchanged. Despite COVID-19's effect on employment and daily life, most fathers in this small study sample reported few or no changes to their coparenting and romantic relationships.

“*Between trying to move and not being able to work, that was probably the most frustrating. But it didn't have a negative effect our relationship. We understood what was going on, and we just stayed positive, and kept pushing forward.*” – **Father**

“*For me, COVID-19 didn't affect my coparenting. It didn't affect really much, other than just [needing to be more] aware of others.*” – **Father**

For some fathers living with their partners or children, COVID-19 led to improvements in their relationships. In some cases, fathers described the way their romantic relationships and relationships with their children actually benefitted due to the ability to spend more time together. Fathers and coparents who were romantically involved and living together discussed the advantages of being able to “slow down” and focus on their relationship or family.

“*Being here [at home], it made us closer. Yeah. We sit around and chit-chat, talk about life and things around here.*” – **Coparent**

“*We are self-isolating, and it was a bit stressful. [But] we get along really, really well, so it's kind of a bonus to be able to spend time with your best friend.*” – **Father**

“*I'd say relationships got better from then to now. Because we're with each other all day and night now. No school. So we talk a lot more. So I'm finding out more about the kids. They're opening up.*” – **Father**

For some fathers not living with their children, the pandemic negatively affected their ability to spend time in-person with their children. Both fathers and staff attributed this trend to pandemic-related safety concerns and increased challenges around custody and visitation. These challenges were especially acute for fathers with coparenting relationships that were already strained. A few fathers felt that coparents were using COVID-19 as an “excuse” to limit interactions with their children.

“*That's going to be her excuse until this thing is over... She's not going to trust me taking out my son while this is going on.*” – **Father**

“*I got to a point where I called her. I called my ex-wife and asked her. I'm like, “Hey, is it my daughter that doesn't want to see me, or is it you who doesn't want to bring her? I need to know.” And I was supposed to go in court and say, “Hey, my ex-wife is not allowing me to see my daughter and is using the COVID as an excuse.” I almost did that because I was serious about it.*” – **Father**

Often, fathers who could not see their children relied on calls and video chats to stay connected:

“ I needed to remind her [my daughter] that I was still here and that I’m okay...So FaceTime actually helped me with that.”
– **Father**

“ It was kind of challenging because I miss their [my children’s] presence, their being around. But I can say, I was still reaching out to them. We would still be in contact over the phone or FaceTime or video chat.”
– **Father**



▶ **Fatherhood Programs Moved to Remote Relationship Programming During COVID-19, Which Brought Challenges and Benefits**

Programs used multiple methods to remotely deliver healthy relationship education and foster an environment where fathers were comfortable discussing their relationships. Prior to COVID-19, fatherhood programs tended to deliver content related to healthy relationships using in-person, curriculum-based workshops. For many programs, the interactions between fathers and facilitators in these workshops helped to create a safe space where fathers felt comfortable discussing their relationship experiences and challenges.⁵ During COVID-19, fatherhood programs tried to identify ways to promote this same safe space through remote delivery of the workshop. This was most often done live through video conferencing software such as Zoom or online platforms such as Facebook Live. Some programs also prerecorded sessions and posted videos to YouTube accounts or Facebook groups for participants to access and view at their own pace.

While prerecorded material allowed for flexibility in scheduling, many staff reported that live approaches (e.g., Zoom calls and Facebook Live) provided crucial opportunities to continue to build rapport with fathers and create a trusting environment. Ultimately, both fathers and staff agreed that while it was easier to establish this safe space when fathers and facilitators met face-to-face, they were still able to foster these spaces when using live approaches to remote programming, which allowed for important conversations around coparenting and romantic relationships to continue.

“ Well, of course, in-person classes are in my opinion by far the best, but with us using Zoom and such and interacting the way we do, it’s about as close as you can possibly get to in-person...we’re still able to develop a rapport with them.”
– **Program Staff**

“ There’s this natural instinct to, when you’re on a Zoom meeting, just to kind of check out...But no, [the facilitator] just really did a great job of keeping everybody checked in and just creating that environment where everybody...wanted to chip in.” – **Father**



Program staff increased one-on-one outreach to build and maintain personal connections.

To further build rapport and keep fathers engaged and invested in programming, staff at many programs reported increasing efforts to maintain contact with fathers outside of workshop sessions. One program replaced some group programming with one-on-one instruction, which the program director felt “allowed people to learn better by having that direct contact where they can have all attention from their facilitator.” This one-on-one outreach, which was often conducted by phone or video software, was described by staff as a “vital” means of providing support to fathers. Some staff spoke of plans to incorporate additional one-on-one engagement into programming moving forward.

“ Our typical engagement strategy is to make sure that their facilitators are contacting them each week and recording the notes from those calls in our data system. So, we’ve ramped that up and put more oversight in that to make sure that was happening.” – **Program Staff**

Programs faced some challenges in delivering relationship services virtually. Program staff described a few key challenges to using remote platforms to deliver workshop content and/or provide one-on-one outreach. Some fathers were unfamiliar with the technology used and required extra coaching by program staff. Furthermore, not all fathers had access to a computer or smartphone. In these cases, fathers called into workshop sessions but were unable to use video options. Fathers were prone to distraction when using virtual approaches, particularly when they were in a shared space or were not on camera. Programs described creating ground rules to minimize disruptions.

“ Before we do the class, we kind of have some ground rules. You can’t be moving around. You’ve got to be still. You’ve got to be visible at all times. We’ve got to be able to see you on camera. And participation is a must.” – **Program Staff**

However, virtual programming brought some unexpected benefits. At the same time, staff felt that there were a number of advantages to delivering relationship services remotely. In some cases, shyer, quieter fathers seemed to be more comfortable participating virtually, particularly when they were allowed to comment using chat functions. In addition, virtual programming mitigated transportation and scheduling issues, allowing more fathers to participate and increasing the program’s reach.

“ I think what we’re learning is that you may have some fathers that won’t speak in group, but now with Facebook, I mean, they’re typing and they’re putting a comment.” – **Program Staff**

“ I’m already thinking, “Man, this is probably going to be a part of our ongoing service platform.” And so, the issue of how do we reach the entire county all of a sudden becomes a lot simpler if this is one of the vehicles that we can use for it.” – **Program Staff**

► Responding to COVID-19: Strategies that Fatherhood Programs Can Use to Support Healthy Relationships Going Forward

The following strategies draw on lessons learned from fathers and fatherhood program staff about challenges and changes to programming during COVID-19. Fatherhood programs may consider adopting some or all of these strategies to support fathers' healthy relationships during and after COVID-19.

Continue delivering relationship programming alongside services that address immediate needs such as unemployment. The pandemic highlighted how various stressors, such as financial hardship, can affect relationships. Programs that help fathers meet their basic needs have the potential to pave the way for stronger romantic and coparenting relationships. Most fatherhood programs provide a range of services that span far beyond relationship programming, including employment services and case management. Fatherhood programs should retain these varied programmatic offerings to ensure that fathers are supported in meeting their immediate and ongoing needs.

Support fathers in learning to slow down and focus on the importance of their relationships with their family and children. For fathers living with their partners and children, COVID-19 and the associated lockdowns provided important opportunities for interaction and connection. In some cases, this increased time together led to reported improvements in relationship quality. While the social circumstances around COVID-19 were unique, fatherhood programs can emphasize the way that quality time with their family and children can help strengthen relationships of all kinds.

Provide specific supports for fathers facing difficulty seeing their children amid strained coparenting relationships. For fathers not living with their children, COVID-19 exacerbated existing challenges around access and visitation. These challenges were particularly salient for fathers whose coparenting relationships were already contentious. Fatherhood programs can provide specific assistance in navigating these relationships with both coparents and children using services such as case management or connecting fathers with counseling or legal assistance.^a

Use virtual platforms with live interaction to increase program reach while still preserving the safe space necessary for discussions about relationships. Use of virtual platforms could help programs reach more fathers, accommodate scheduling and transportation difficulties, and provide alternate ways for shyer fathers to participate in relationship-focused program components. By incorporating approaches that allow fathers to participate live as a group—such as Zoom or Facebook Live sessions—programs may still be able to foster the safe discussion space critical for relationship education. Programs may want to create ground rules to promote engagement during virtual sessions, such as asking fathers to find a private space, leave their cameras on (when possible), and participate in discussions, either verbally or using a chat function.

Supplement programming with increased one-on-one support to help ensure strong connections and engagement in relationship programming. A key takeaway from interviews with staff was the increased use of virtual one-on-one support during the pandemic to keep fathers engaged in the program. Ensuring fathers' investment in the fatherhood program as a whole can lead to enhanced engagement with relationship-related content.⁵ Many programs may want to consider retaining ongoing, virtual engagement beyond the pandemic.

^aNote that services such as counseling and legal assistance are not allowable expenses under federal Responsible Fatherhood (RF) grant funds. RF programs should find alternate funding sources to support these activities.

► Conclusions

COVID-19 posed unique challenges and opportunities for fathers and fatherhood programs related to romantic and coparenting relationships. Many fathers demonstrated resiliency in their relationships and, in some cases, these relationships actually improved despite significant economic and other COVID-related stressors. Ultimately, the support fatherhood programs provided during COVID-19 highlights the benefits and durability of these programs. Program staff demonstrated critical flexibility and adaptability to continue to support fathers' relationships throughout this unprecedented time. Many of the changes forged during the pandemic may continue to serve as important strategies to support fathers in their coparenting and romantic relationships moving forward.



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