

OPRE Report #2018-18

# **Parents and Children Together: The Complex Needs of Low-Income Men and How Responsible Fatherhood Programs Address Them**

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Robin Dion, Pamela Holcomb, Heather Zaveri, Angela Valdovinos  
D'Angelo, Elizabeth Clary, Daniel Friend, Scott Baumgartner

Submitted to:

Office of Planning, Research, & Evaluation  
Administration for Children and Families  
U. S. Department of Health and Human Services  
330 C Street SW, 4th Floor  
Washington, DC 20201

Project Officer: Seth Chamberlain (OPRE-COR)

Kathleen McCoy (OPRE/BSC – Project Monitor)

Contract Number: HHSP23320095642WC

Submitted by:

Mathematica Policy Research  
1100 1st Street, NE  
12th Floor  
Washington, DC 20002-4221  
Telephone: (202) 484-9220  
Facsimile: (202) 863-1763

Project Director: Robin Dion

Reference Number: 06997.57G



This report is in the public domain. Permission to reproduce is not necessary. Suggested citation: Dion, Robin, Pamela Holcomb, Heather Zaveri, Angela Valdovinos D'Angelo, Elizabeth Clary, Daniel Friend, and Scott Baumgartner (2018). Parents and Children Together: The Complex Needs of Low-Income Men and How Responsible Fatherhood Programs Address Them. OPRE Report Number 2018-18. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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This report and other reports sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, are available at <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre>.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We wish to thank the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) and the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) at the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) for its support of the Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation. We are deeply grateful for the excellent guidance and feedback provided by our OPRE project officer Seth Chamberlain and project monitor Kathleen McCoy. This report also benefitted from insightful comments by ACF leadership: Robin McDonald, Charisse Johnson, Naomi Goldstein, and Maria Woolverton.

Many individuals made important contributions to this report and we are fortunate to have a strong and collaborative study team composed of Mathematica staff and expert consultants. PACT's qualitative study component could not have been done without the invaluable guidance and contributions of expert ethnographers Alford Young and Waldo Johnson. Drawing on their experience researching African American men, they contributed to development of the instruments for the qualitative study, conducted in-depth interviews with fathers, participated in the analysis, and co-authored the initial report on findings. We are grateful to many staff at Mathematica who also conducted in-depth interviews and spent many hours coding transcripts: Reggie Covington, Jeffrey Max, Angela D'Angelo, Daniel Friend, and Liz Clary. The qualitative study was co-led by Pamela Holcomb at Mathematica and consultant Kathryn Edin.

PACT's implementation study component involved numerous Mathematica staff. We thank Alma Vigil for her expert programming of the baseline survey results which describes key characteristics of fathers participating in the study, as well as the analysis of PACTIS data describing program enrollment and participation. Site visits were conducted by Scott Baumgartner, Angela D'Angelo, Liz Clary, Daniel Friend, Heather Zaveri and Robin Dion. Earlier implementation study work was conducted by Sharon McGroder, Carrie Wolfson, Brandon Coffee-Borden, Rebecca DiGiuseppe, Kevin Collins, and Rebecca Newsham. Heather Zaveri led the implementation study.

We are particularly grateful to Alford Young, Waldo Johnson, and Barbara Devaney for their thoughtful reviews of a draft of this report. The overall PACT evaluation is led by Robin Dion, whose guidance and continuous feedback strengthens the overall quality of the project's data collection, analysis, and reporting. She envisioned an integration of the qualitative and implementation study findings and led this report's development.

We appreciate Amanda Bernhardt for arranging the editing of the report and Betty Teller and Bridget Gutierrez for their diligent editing; Sharon Clark for her efficient formatting; and Brigitte Tran for her creative report design and graphic design expertise.

We also wish to thank the grantees and their staff, who hosted us for site visits and participated in interviews. In particular, we would like to thank the leadership at each program: Halbert Sullivan and Cheri Tillis (Family Formation Program); Andrew Freeberg and Guy Bowling (FATHER Project); Brad Lambert, Kathy Lambert, and Brandi Jahnke (Successful STEPS); and John Turnipseed and Stan Hill (Center for Fathering).

Finally, and most importantly, we wish to thank the men who responded to the baseline survey and participated in in-depth interviews for openly sharing their views and experiences, and providing us with such a rich and nuanced portrait of their life circumstances and challenges.

## OVERVIEW

Broad changes in family demographics have left many children without the support or involvement of their fathers. As a result of high rates of nonmarital births and divorce, millions of American children do not live with both of their parents. Rates of nonresidence are particularly high among groups that tend to face more economic challenges: 58 percent of black children and 31 percent of Hispanic children were living without their biological fathers in 2012 (Vespa et al. 2013). Father absence is associated with a range of unfavorable outcomes for children, including poor social-emotional adjustment, dropping out of school, and experiencing mental health problems as adults (McLanahan et al. 2013).

Research suggests that the negative effects for children of father absence may be mitigated through greater father involvement. Nonresidential fathers' greater contact with their children is associated with fewer child and adolescent behavior problems (King and Sobolewski 2006). The quality of father-child interaction also appears to matter (Stewart 2003; Marsiglio et al. 2000). Nonresidential fathers' engagement in child-related activities has been found to be linked to positive social, emotional and behavioral adjustment in children (Adamsons and Johnson 2013).

To address these issues, Congress has funded the Responsible Fatherhood (RF) grant program since 2006. The grant program is administered by the Office of Family Assistance at the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. RF grants require programs to offer services for fathers in three areas: parenting and fatherhood, economic stability, and healthy marriage and relationships.

The Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation is studying four RF programs using a rigorous multi-component research design. Conducted by Mathematica Policy Research for the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation at ACF, PACT focuses on three broad areas: fathers' backgrounds, views, and experiences (qualitative study component), how the programs were implemented (implementation study component), and the programs' effects on fathers' outcomes (impacts study component). Recognizing that RF programming will continue to grow and evolve, PACT is providing a building block in the evidence base to guide ongoing and future program design and evaluation efforts.

### Primary Research Questions

Large-scale, rigorous evaluations of fatherhood programs have been sparse, leading to gaps in the knowledge base, including whether the needs of fathers who volunteer for the programs are addressed in program activities, and how that in turn, may affect their engagement and participation. This report examines the characteristics and views of fathers who voluntarily enrolled in them, how the programs were designed and implemented, and how fathers responded to the services offered.

- What were the circumstances, experiences, needs, and concerns of fathers at program entry?
- To what extent and how did programs seek to address the needs, concerns, and circumstances presented by fathers?
- How did fathers respond to the offered programming in terms of their participation and perceptions of the services received?

## Purpose

This report has two goals: to develop a greater understanding of programmatic features that lead to strong engagement and participation by fathers, and to provide context for the evaluation's forthcoming results on how fathers' outcomes were affected by the programs.

## Key Findings and Highlights

The fathers who chose to enroll in the four programs were primarily low-income African American men in their mid-thirties with between two and three children, on average. The fathers had lower levels of education, employment, and earnings than men in the general population. Most were never married to the mothers of their children, and two-thirds were no longer romantically involved with the mothers. Fatherhood was thus experienced through the lens of living apart from some or all of their children.

- Fathers described lives full of adversity during childhood and adolescence, including abuse, neglect, poverty, and the absence of their fathers. As adults, many experienced job, income, and housing instability, racial discrimination, loss, and depressive symptoms.
- Many fathers shared that as they grew older, they came to accept responsibility for actions that led them to incarceration and relationship instability as young men. Fatherhood became a strong motivation for them to turn their lives around—for the sake of their children and themselves.
- Programs offered content to address many of the needs and challenges expressed by fathers, and fathers resonated strongly to most of the services provided.
  - Fathers credited programs with helping them learn skills to be better and more involved parents and providers. They viewed staff who had overcome similar challenges as strong and inspiring role models.
  - All programs included a focus on foundational skills, habits, and attitudes to support fathers' development as responsible parents, partners, and providers.
  - Economic instability undermined fathers' ability to financially support themselves and their children. Fathers appreciated learning employment readiness and job seeking skills, though past incarceration records were often a barrier to employment.
  - Fathers were often frustrated that their child support orders were not aligned with their actual earnings and employment, leading them to have difficulty supporting themselves.
  - Fathers would have liked more help with their co-parenting relationships, which were often conflicted or disengaged and led to difficulty accessing children. Few fathers had a court order granting them visitation, shared custody, or parenting-time agreements.
- Fathers' participation in services likely reflected their interests, but was also linked to program features, such as structure and type of content offered.
  - On average, fathers participated in 45 hours of programming. This average ranged from 15 to 88 hours depending on the program. Fathers in intensive, daily programs spent more hours in program activities than those in weekly, less intensive programs.



- o Most of the content received by fathers at the intensive daily programs was focused on economic stability, followed by parenting and personal development. Conversely, most programming received by fathers in the open-entry weekly programs focused on parenting and personal development, and less on economic stability.
- o Fathers who received healthy marriage and relationships content reported learning communication and conflict management skills; however fathers were least likely to receive this content relative to other content. Fathers were most likely to receive healthy marriage content when it was woven into a single workshop that integrated content from all key areas, rather than offering it as a standalone service.

## **Methods**

This report integrates findings from all data collected as part of PACT’s qualitative and implementation studies of RF programs. Sources include a baseline survey data collected at the time of enrollment for all 5,522 enrolled fathers; three rounds of annual in-depth interviews conducted in person with a subset of fathers from each program; two rounds of data from interviews with staff members during site visits; focus group findings with fathers; and data collected by programs on fathers’ enrollment and participation. The report organizes findings around five topics: fathers’ personal development and well-being; parenting and co-parenting; marriage and relationships; economic stability; and financial support of children. It concludes with a synthesis across these topics.

## **Recommendations**

- To increase overall participation, consider offering daily cohort-based services, rather than weekly open-entry services, especially for unemployed fathers.
- To engage fathers in workshops, employ program graduates and other fathers who have overcome challenges similar to those of participants
- Incorporate a focus on developing fathers’ foundational skills, but also consider strategies for addressing fathers’ substance abuse and mental health issues.
- To help fathers build on and apply parenting skills, identify ways to provide assistance with visitation rights, parenting time agreements, or shared custody.
- To maximize the dosage of healthy marriage services that participants receive, consider the potential effects of service delivery structure, messaging, and curriculum content.
- To ensure strong participation in economic stability services, consider having fathers engage in self-directed tailored activities each day until they obtain employment.
- Explore opportunities to increase assistance for child support modifications.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Not only mothers, but also fathers, including those who do not live with their children, have an important role in shaping children's outcomes.

Family research confirms what most people believe based on personal experience—that family matters. The family and environment in which we grow up affect lifelong outcomes such as education, employment, and adult mental health (McLanahan et al. 2013). Not only mothers, but also fathers, including those who do not live with their children, have an important role in shaping children's outcomes (Carlson 2006; King and Sobolewski 2006; Edin and Nelson, 2013; Mincy et al. 2015). However, the past several decades have seen broad changes in the family and left many U.S. children without the support or involvement of their fathers. Currently, a smaller percentage of Americans are married than at any time in history, and nearly 40 percent of all births are to unmarried women; most children born into these families grow up without both parents (Ventura 2009; Payne 2013). The problem is compounded among racial/ethnic minorities where economic challenges tend to be more prominent: 58 percent of black children and 31 percent of Hispanic children were living without their biological fathers compared to white children (21 percent) in 2012 (Vespa et al. 2013).

The RF legislation requires grantees to offer voluntary services in three key areas: (1) parenting education and support; (2) services to improve economic stability and employment; and (3) training in skills for healthy marriage and relationships.

Research suggests that the negative effects for children of father absence may be mitigated through greater father involvement. Nonresidential fathers' greater contact with their children is associated with fewer child and adolescent behavior problems (King and Sobolewski 2006; Howard et al. 2006; Caldwell et al. 2011; Ellis et al. 2012). Not only the amount of contact but also the quality of father-child interaction matters (Stewart 2003; Marsiglio et al. 2000), and a recent meta-analysis showed that nonresidential fathers' engagement in specific child-related activities is associated with positive social, emotional and behavioral adjustment in children (Adamsons and Johnson 2013).

Congress authorized the Responsible Fatherhood (RF) grant program in 2005; grants funded through this program can promote positive involvement of fathers with their children. The RF legislation requires grantees to offer voluntary services in three key areas: (1) parenting education and support; (2) services to improve economic stability and employment; and (3) training in skills for healthy marriage and relationships. Dozens of organizations across the country have implemented programs that include these services, and the diverse range of service delivery structures and formats reflect differing underlying philosophies about how to effect change. Researchers' collective understanding of how RF programs work, the fathers that choose to participate in them, and the programs' effectiveness on desired outcomes, however, is still in its infancy.

To build a foundation of knowledge to guide ongoing and future programmatic efforts in the field of Responsible Fatherhood programming, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services sponsored a multi-component research project, known as the Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation (Box I.1). One of PACT's main evaluation components is a study

of fathers and programs serving them at a subset of organizations that received an RF grant in 2011. This study component (listed first in Box I.1) was designed to expand our understanding of RF program implementation, provide a detailed portrait of the lives of fathers who voluntarily enroll in RF programs, and serve as an initial building block in the evidence base documenting what works to increase positive father involvement.

PACT's main evaluation of RF programs focuses on 5,522 fathers who enrolled in the study at one of four RF programs between 2012 and 2015. To understand RF programs and the fathers who participate in them, it addresses research questions from several angles. An implementation study examines how RF programs were designed and operated and documented outputs such as participation rates. A qualitative study focuses on three annual rounds of in-depth, in-person interviews with a subset of participating fathers to understand the broader context of their lives. And a rigorous random-assignment study of program impacts measures the effects of RF programs on fathers' engagement with their children, their employment and economic self-sufficiency, family functioning, and co-parenting and romantic relationships 12 months after enrollment.

### **Box I.1. The PACT evaluation**

The PACT evaluation is a large-scale multi-component research project intended to broaden understanding of several types of family strengthening grantees funded by ACF. [Text in blue is the focus of this report.](#)

#### **MAIN EVALUATION COMPONENTS**

- **Responsible Fatherhood programs**
  - Implementation study of program operations
  - Qualitative study of fathers
  - Impact study of program effectiveness
- **Healthy Marriage programs**
  - Implementation study of program operations
  - Impact study of program effectiveness

#### **SPECIAL TOPIC STUDIES**

- **Responsible Fatherhood programs serving Hispanic men**
  - Descriptive study of role of culture in program implementation
- **Programs for fathers re-entering society after incarceration**
  - Descriptive study of trauma-informed approaches to serving fathers in re-entry

The four RF programs that participated in the PACT RF study (Box I.2)—profiled in detail in a past report (Zaveri et al. 2015)—operated in Kansas, Missouri, and Minnesota. These programs took one of two approaches to service delivery: (1) an integrated cohort approach that offered integrated and intensive services to groups of fathers who began and proceeded through the program together, or (2) an open-entry approach that allowed fathers to select from a menu of lower-intensity services and begin receiving services quickly on a drop-in basis. The integrated cohort approach was taken by Successful STEPS (SS), which integrated two of the three required grant components (partial integration), and the Family Formation Program (FFP) which integrated all three components (fully integrated). The FATHER project (TFP) and Center for Fathering (CFF) took the open-entry approach to service delivery.

**Box I.2. RF programs participating in PACT**



Successful STEPS, at Connections to Success (Kansas City, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri)



Family Formation Program, at Fathers' Support Center St. Louis (St. Louis, Missouri)



FATHER Project, at Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota (Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota)



Center for Fathering, at Urban Ventures (Minneapolis, Minnesota)

This report provides a comprehensive picture of the fathers and programs that served them by integrating findings from the PACT RF qualitative and implementation studies. In particular, it examines the extent to which programs offered services that speak to the needs and views fathers expressed during their qualitative in-depth interviews. The report addresses the following research questions:

- 1. What were the circumstances of fathers at program entry, and what experiences, needs, and concerns did they describe during in-depth interviews?**
- 2. How did programs seek to address the needs, concerns, and circumstances presented by fathers?**
- 3. How did fathers respond to the offered programming by way of their participation and views of the services?**

One of the main goals of this research is to reflect on what the findings suggest about the role of programmatic factors, such as intensity, structure, and type of content, in program engagement and participation. To address the research questions, we draw on the complete array of data sources in the implementation and qualitative studies covering the full enrollment period.<sup>1</sup> Sources include baseline data collected at the time of enrollment for all sample members; two rounds of data from site visits including focus group findings; data on enrollment and participation for all program group fathers; and three rounds of in-depth interviews with a subset of fathers.

The remainder of this report addresses the three research questions within each of five areas of fathers' lives: personal development; parenting and co-parenting; healthy marriage and relationships; economic stability; and financial support of children. For each area, we describe the background characteristics of enrolled fathers; the experiences and perceived needs of a subset of fathers as conveyed in their own words; the services offered by programs, their content, structure, and intensity; and how fathers responded to the offered services by way of their participation and thoughts about the services. We conclude with a summary and some implications for future program design.



## II. PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT



Some fathers experience difficult life circumstances and adverse events (sometimes through no fault of their own and sometimes prompted by their own life choices) that can put them at risk of difficulty fulfilling their roles as supportive parents, partners and providers (Duck 2015). Many fathers in PACT entered the program with such disadvantages. To improve the human condition of the fathers and prepare them to focus on the grant-required topics of parenting, economic stability, and healthy marriage, programs worked to strengthen fathers' underlying protective factors. Protective factors include such skills and assets as stress management, goal setting, problem solving, accountability and responsibility, and social support. Programs included content in these and related areas, which we have labelled "personal development." This chapter explores some of the common challenges and stressors that helped shape the lives of fathers who participated in these RF programs, the efforts of the programs to help fathers deal more effectively with their current challenges and effects of past adverse experiences, and fathers' participation in and responses to these services.

### **Most fathers in PACT had complex, challenging life experiences**

At enrollment, most fathers in PACT were experiencing difficult life circumstances (Table II.1). According to survey data collected at baseline, the typical father in PACT had low education, income, and earnings. About half of the fathers were not employed, and among those who did have a job, the majority earned less than \$1,000 per month (Table V.1). Most were African American men in their mid-thirties who had been involved with the criminal justice system in the past: 72 percent had been convicted of a crime, and 33 percent were on parole at the time they enrolled in a RF program. Fathers were often unstably housed, and more than one-quarter of the fathers were at

risk for moderate or severe depression according to a well-established, standardized measure (the Patient Health Questionnaire; Kroenke, Spitzer, and Williams 2001).

**Table II.1. Selected baseline characteristics of enrolled fathers**

	Integrated Cohort Programs		Open-Entry Workshop Programs		Total Sample
	FFP	SS	CFF	TFP	
<b>Demographics</b>					
Average age (years)	34	37	39	32	35
Race and ethnicity (%)					
Hispanic	1	3	4	17	5
Black, non-Hispanic	93	74	80	62	80
White, non-Hispanic	4	17	7	13	9
Other	3	6	9	8	6
<b>Socioeconomic Status</b>					
Have high school diploma/GED (%)	64	68	73	71	69
Worked for pay last 30 days (%)	53	46	43	62	51
Worked for pay last 6 months (%)	73	68	62	78	70
<b>Housing Stability</b>					
Stable housing %					
Own home	2	3	1	3	2
Rent home	24	21	28	33	27
Contribute to rent	22	10	15	22	18
Unstable housing %					
Half-way house, group house, or treatment facility	5	18	14	7	10
Homeless	7	10	17	7	10
Live rent free in someone's home	36	35	21	25	29
Other unstable housing	4	4	5	4	4
<b>Criminal justice system involvement</b>					
Ever been arrested (%)	93	95	91	85	91
Ever been convicted of a crime (%)	65	82	80	70	72
Currently on parole (%)	35	44	30	29	33
<b>Psychological well-being</b>					
At risk for moderate or severe depression (%)	29	18	30	26	27
<b>Sample size</b>	<b>1,994</b>	<b>779</b>	<b>1,643</b>	<b>1,106</b>	<b>5,522</b>

Source: PACT Baseline Enrollment Survey

Note: Sites began PACT intake between December 9, 2012 and February 13, 2013. All fathers randomly assigned were included.

"A lot of our clients have seen things as children no child should ever have to see. A lot of them have had things done to them that no child should ever have to endure. And some of them were asked to take on adult roles long before they had an understanding of how to navigate an adult world. And it's left them confused and broken."

—Stan, program facilitator, CFF

## **PACT fathers described "rough" lives filled with painful experiences**

The qualitative data collected during in-depth interviews sheds light on what is behind the difficult circumstances reported by fathers in the baseline survey. Most fathers described lives defined and shaped by trauma. Accounts of their childhoods were typically filled with stories about the absence or limited involvement of their biological father—or any positive father figure—and about early exposure to substance abuse and violence. As adults, fathers faced many chronic adversities, such as ongoing economic and housing instability, losing central figures in their lives, dealing with perceived discrimination, and being marginalized as unimportant in their children's lives. Fathers did their best to cope with these challenges, some showing resilience in the face of constant struggles.

### **Early exposure to traumatic events and toxic stress in childhood was typical for fathers**

Fathers reported that abuse or neglect by parents, caretakers, or step-parents permeated their interactions with adults during childhood. For the most part, fathers had been absent or an intermittent presence in the lives of these men. Their mothers were generally a more consistent presence during their childhoods, although some of those mothers had their own share of personal challenges—drug addiction, relationships with abusive men—that negatively affected their ability to parent.

In addition to exposure to parental domestic violence and substance abuse, many fathers shared accounts of stepfathers or mothers' boyfriends as physically or emotionally abusive toward them. Some men felt that the abuse they were exposed to growing up affected their development in unhealthy ways. For example, Patrick, a 45-year-old father, who described growing up watching his dad and his stepfather physically abuse his mother noted with regret that "I picked up a lot of his traits, the drinking, the alcohol, the abuse of women, not having known how to carry a relationship." For many fathers, the motivation to embrace the role of fatherhood and be actively involved in their children's lives stemmed from their desire to compensate for the absence of their own fathers, or for the neglectful, traumatic, and sometimes abusive early experiences they had suffered themselves.

"We had no food, none. We used to eat Cheerios with water."

—Lamar

Closely linked with difficult conditions and trauma experienced inside their home, most fathers in our study also recounted growing up in poverty and living in dangerous neighborhoods marked by drugs and gang violence (Duck 2015). Almost a third of fathers participating in the first round of in-depth interviews described getting involved in drugs and gangs as youth and most had been arrested by the time they enrolled in the RF program. Fathers' accounts of their life history often pointed to their earlier involvement in gangs, using and dealing drugs, and "running the streets" as playing a major contributing role in their development and leading to detrimental

outcomes like substance abuse, addiction, violence, and jail time. At the same time, while street life was filled with dangers of its own kind, it also offered not only a source of income but also a sense of acceptance and belonging—all of which were otherwise in short supply.

When chronic childhood stress is not buffered by the positive support of one or more adults, health and mental health can be affected (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). This kind of stress is often labelled “toxic stress,” since it activates a response system that can interfere with the normal development of the brain and other organs, and increase the risk for heart disease, diabetes, substance abuse and depression well into adulthood. Twenty-seven percent of fathers in PACT were at risk for moderate to severe depression, and program staff observed high rates of past substance abuse among the men. Research also shows that men with early childhood trauma and family dysfunction are nearly twice as likely to report unemployment as adults relative to men without these experiences (Liu et al. 2013), and almost half of the men in this study had been unemployed in the past 30 days when they enrolled.

“in the blink of an eye, you can be killed. And the police officers are the ones who are supposed to protect you but they’re the ones who kill you ... [they] can jump out and beat you up and you don’t got to have no reason—just because you’re standing outside.”

—Willie

### **As adults, fathers in RF programs continued to experience chronic stress**

Potentially compounding the lingering effects of early adversity and toxic stress experienced in childhood and adolescence, the fathers in PACT often described ongoing chronic stress as adults. Fathers in the in-depth interviews frequently described experiences of racial discrimination, loss, incarceration, chronic poverty, job and housing instability, and difficulty accessing their children.

For many fathers, experiences and perceptions of racial discrimination were embedded into the fabric of their daily lives and were a chronic underlying source of stress. Fathers gave examples of how they perceived their interactions with law enforcement. These included being threatened and roughed up by the police “[for] no reason... just because you’re standing outside,” the need for constant vigilance to avoid unwanted “run-ins” with the law, and feeling as if the legal system is stacked against them. The firsthand experiences men had with law enforcement and the legal system, combined with their experiences and perceptions of racial discrimination, often led fathers to adopt a hypervigilant stance and to view systems with distrust and suspicion.

Experiences of loss, in particular the deaths of friends and family members, represented another source of stress. Some found they could not cope with the deaths of those closest to them, and were left feeling depressed, alienated, and isolated. Zakary, a 31 year old father, responded to the death of his godmother when he was 17 by getting “... high a lot. [...] got drunk a lot. I used to be in school with a bottle of Absolut.” He still had not come to terms with her passing, saying “I don’t even think I’ve been myself since then. I think I’ve been hiding under somebody who ain’t even me.”

As noted earlier, most fathers enrolled in PACT previously spent time in prison, ranging from one to three years. Incarceration in and of itself is a traumatic experience that can take a significant emotional and psychological toll (DeVeaux, 2013, Goff et al. 2007, Haney 2002). For the most part, fathers participating in our in-depth interviews did not dwell on their lives while in prison. However, as part of discussions about their current and sometimes dire economic circumstances, fathers did speak at length about the difficulties they faced as a result of having a felony record, particularly in the context of obtaining employment and housing.



Fathers were constantly exposed to the chronic stress of not being able to make ends meet and lacking a place to call home. The need to support their children financially also contributed to difficulty attaining economic stability, a theme described more fully in Chapter V. At enrollment, almost three out of four fathers who participated in the first round of the in-depth interviews were either unemployed or made \$500 or less in the past month. Doubling up, living in shelters, and living in vacant homes or on the streets often had to suffice when men could not secure stable housing. Even those fathers who were employed spoke about their struggles to get by financially because of low wages, temporary work, and limited hours.

In addition to all the ongoing stressors of daily life, one of the most emotionally fraught issues for many fathers was that they longed for greater involvement in the lives of their children and to be better able to financially provide for them (see Chapter VI). Although fathers talked about the importance of providing financially for their children, unemployment and economic instability made it difficult for them to meet this responsibility, with some fathers describing their inability to financially provide for their children as the “toughest” part of fatherhood.



## Fathers sought strategies to turn their lives around and cope with challenges

"Growing up without him [his dad], him in and out of my life. I was like 'man I'll never be like that'... Right, and I'm trying, I've tried real hard not to be like that but I'm being exactly that."

– Darwin

A persistent theme that emerged during in-depth interviews with fathers was these men's desire to change and improve their lives, both for themselves and for the sake of their children. On average, fathers were in their mid-thirties, and most had come to accept personal responsibility for their negative behavior during adolescence and young adulthood. Their voluntary enrollment in an RF program was in most cases a choice that demonstrated their desire to turn their lives around and become better parents, partners, and providers.

Becoming a father for the first time—or stepping into the father role after not being involved earlier in a child's life—had the power to transform these men's outlook on life, alter their decision making, and redirect their life course. In the absence of positive role models to inspire and support their personal development, fathers often tried to achieve this by turning the trauma of being abandoned or neglected by their own fathers into a model of how *not* to conduct their own lives. This was not an easy or simple process. In the telling of their life histories, many fathers felt as though they had gone down the same or similar road as their fathers before them. While this was an additional motivation to make sure their children did not get caught up in the same cycle, fathers entering RF programs generally lacked the positive role models, tools, or social networks to help them achieve this goal.

Fathers typically relied on two positive strategies for coping with the challenges in their lives: they relied on their faith and spirituality for strength and guidance, and/or they kept their heads down and focused on steering clear of trouble. One-third of fathers who participated in in-depth interviews named churches as sources of support in their lives (D'Angelo et al. 2016). To steer clear of trouble, some fathers said they left behind old friends who were still involved in the types of behaviors they were trying to avoid. This sometimes left men feeling isolated and alone (D'Angelo et al. 2016).

## RF programs offered content and peer and staff support to help fathers overcome personal challenges

Programs provided support to help fathers with personal development in three main ways: by delivering content on specific topics in core workshops and individual-level services; by providing opportunities for peer interaction and support; and by employing staff who could serve as role models for participants.

## Content focused on helping fathers develop foundational skills, habits, and attitudes

The RF programs in PACT offered various types of content aimed at helping fathers establish skills, habits, and attitudes that could support their development as fathers, partners and providers. All programs helped fathers explore what it means to be a

"[I] stay to myself. If you don't want to go to jail, then don't do anything ... So I just basically try to stay out of people's way and hopefully people stay out of my way."

–Kyree



“... many of our dads are coming out of homes and communities where they didn’t have structure. Most people do better when they have a structured life. Five days a week. Repetition. Not only does it help with changing the attitude and behavior, we are also working on job readiness ...”

—Halbert, program founder, FFP

man, the importance of being accountable for one’s actions, managing stress and developing a positive mindset, socio-emotional skills, and setting goals for oneself (Table II.2). Other topics commonly offered by some of the programs included problem-solving and decision-making, enhancing emotional well-being, and responding to discrimination.

The majority of personal development content was presented during core workshops on parenting, relationships, or economic stability. It was typically covered during the early part of fathers’ participation, because programs saw it as foundational. One integrated cohort program, for example, felt that the length and intensity of the core workshop itself could be useful in building resilience and accountability. They reasoned that if an unemployed man could succeed in attending a daily, full-day workshop for six weeks, then he would have proven to himself that he could hold a job and handle the responsibility of being a father.

Personal development was also a focus during case management at most programs. Three programs required fathers to create foundational plans that articulated goals and values in multiple life domains, such as education, family, health, and social life.

**Table II.2. Personal development topics in group workshops**

	Integrated Cohort Programs		Open-Entry Workshop Programs	
	FFP	SS	CFF	TFP
Emotional well-being	✓	✓		✓
Responding to discrimination	✓		✓	
Problem solving and decision making	✓	✓		✓
What it means to be a man	✓	✓	✓	✓
Being accountable for one’s actions; personal responsibility	✓	✓	✓	✓
Socioemotional skills	✓	✓	✓	✓
Goal setting and values	✓	✓	✓	✓
Leadership			✓	✓
How to ask for help	✓	✓		✓
Developing a positive mindset	✓	✓	✓	✓
Managing stress	✓	✓	✓	✓
Managing anger	✓			
Health, physical fitness, and substance abuse	✓			✓

Source: Site visits and program documents

Note: Topics shown in this table were covered during at least one of the core program workshops: Parenting education; healthy marriage and relationships education; or workshops on economic stability.

“[We need to] make sure that they are given access to health care, especially mental health care that is consistent, long-term, allows them to talk with a trained professional on an ongoing basis about compound traumas they may have had in the past ...”

—Sue, employment services staff, TFP

All programs provided referrals to non-ACF funded services for help with health and mental health issues, substance abuse, legal problems, and housing, through individual case management. However, program staff also emphasized that the availability of these resources was inadequate and did not begin to meet the need for these fathers.

### Peer support was an essential feature of helping fathers with personal development



The group-based feature of program workshops and other activities was intended to encourage participants to form bonds and gain social support from men like themselves. Some programs implemented specific activities designed to encourage men to share their experiences and receive feedback and support from their peers. At the fully integrated cohort program (Family Formation Program [FFP]), for example, workshop sessions began with each father describing his previous day’s experience as a parent, partner, or job-seeker. Fathers who reached a milestone (such as getting a job interview or access to their child) were typically given positive reinforcement by their peers (such as applause), while fathers who were struggling could receive emotional support and empathy from men who understood their challenges.

Programs offered other opportunities for fathers to interact with their peers. All programs offered a regular job club, which, in addition to providing job search resources, provided fathers an opportunity to share their experiences with each other. Some programs sponsored drop-in peer support groups, and some engaged program graduates in recruiting other fathers for the program.

### Staff who overcame backgrounds similar to those of fathers were powerful role models

Programs’ support of personal development was not limited to workshop content, case management activities and peer support. Each program sought to establish an



“.... The men who come to us, they will better relate to someone who has walked in their shoes ... We have some knowledge about this population and some knowledge about what these men will respond to. ....”

*Halbert, program founder, FFP*

environment oriented around personal improvement by employing men who had faced similar challenges and overcome significant barriers. Many group facilitators were African American men who had incarceration histories and had moved beyond their pasts to become successful parents, partners, and providers. Two programs required workshop facilitators to be program graduates. At one program, facilitators without college degrees were required to be enrolled in college, in part to show program participants that personal development is a process without an endpoint—that even facilitators were continually working to improve themselves. These staff with “lived experience” were encouraged to be open with program participants about their own struggles with issues like drugs, incarceration, and co-parenting, and often used personal anecdotes to illustrate a point in workshops or during individual contacts. The success of these staff at moving beyond their struggles was intended to motivate and inspire fathers to follow their example.

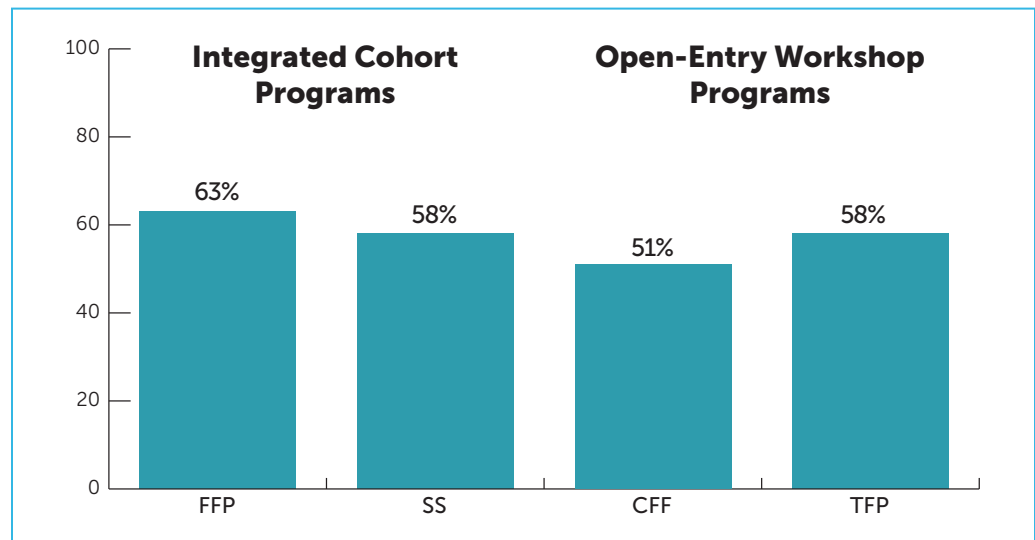
Fathers valued program staff for both the “street cred” they brought to their work and the support they provided. Staff served as positive and inspirational role models for many fathers, recognizing that staff had experienced and risen above many of the same life challenges confronting the fathers.

Program staff also reported that it was common for them to go beyond their usual job duties and see program participants outside normal work hours. For example, an intake worker at one open-entry workshop program, who was hired after graduating from the program, reported that he frequently accompanied men to child support and treatment court hearings on his own time. Having experienced such legal issues, he saw himself as a mentor to men navigating unfamiliar environments. Some fathers pointed to the personal dynamism of their facilitators and appreciated how facilitators and case managers would go the “extra mile” to help them work through their issues and needs.

## Fathers received a substantial amount of content on personal development and it resonated with them

About half or more of fathers engaged in one or more workshop sessions that covered personal development, ranging from 51 to 63 percent across programs (Figure II.1).

**Figure II.1. Initial engagement in personal development content through workshops**



Source: PACTIS/Site MIS Data

Note: Data show participation during the first nine months among all fathers randomly assigned to the program group, N=2,761 (by program: FFP=995; SS=338; CFF=822; TFP=556). Sites began PACT intake between 12/9/2012 and 2/13/2013.

“When I first came to group, I’m very ... like a loner. I didn’t have any trust. But when I heard other people and they heard me, it helped me listen to others’ issues and for me to open up ...”

—Focus group participant

“The classes for me sometimes was just an opportunity for me to step outside of myself, take the mask off.”

—Focus group participant

On average, fathers received an average of 8 hours of personal development content through core workshops. Those who participated in integrated cohort programs received a much larger dose of personal development content through core workshops (9 to 15 hours) than fathers who attended the open-entry programs (1 to 4 hours) (Figure II.2). This analysis of dosage does not include time that fathers may have spent on personal development during individual-level contacts or in optional workshops. In addition, staff suggested that many fathers were referred to outside services such as mental health treatment, but programs did not track the number of fathers who actually received these services.

In focus groups and in-depth interviews, fathers said they appreciated learning skills and information that motivated them to become better men and fathers. Men commonly linked personal development to the goals of being a better father, becoming employed, and finding their footing after leaving prison. To them, these were key aspects of being a “better man.”

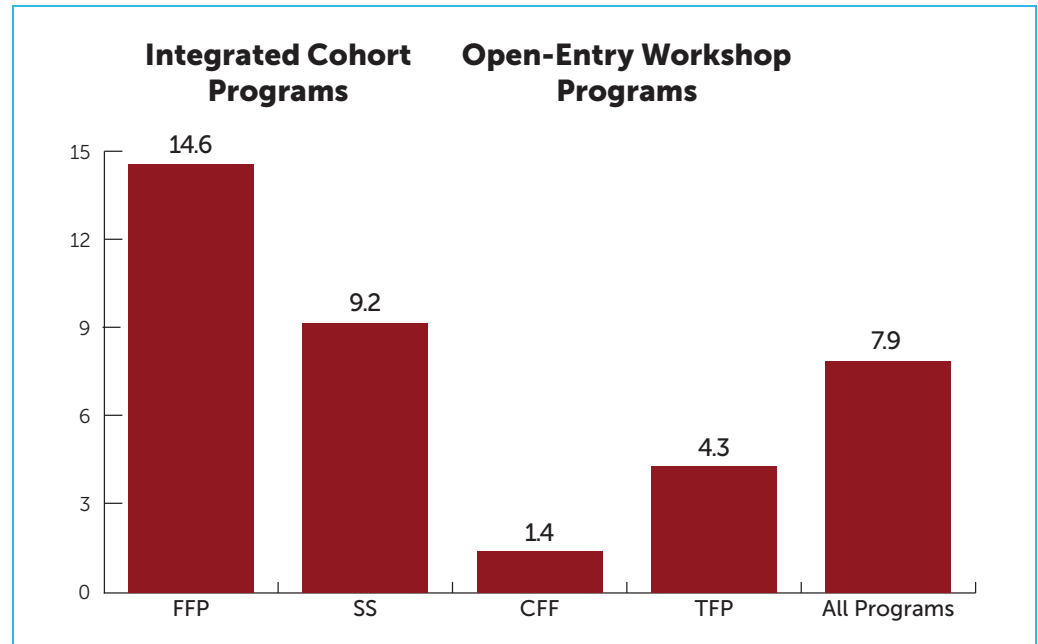
Fathers in the focus groups at all four programs described learning how to take responsibility for their actions and feelings, to trust others, and to be open and honest

“... Being in the streets like that, you have to keep the wall up, the tough persona; you can’t really show very much. It’s either eat or be eaten out there ... But coming around here and being with different people, you can throw the cards back in and get you a new set and try to work with those.”

—Focus group participant

emotionally. They talked about the value of the emotional safety they experienced in the peer workshops, which allowed them to “be themselves.” They felt that they could let their guard down, reflect on who they are, and learn some new skills.

**Figure II.2. Hours of personal development content received in workshops**



Source: PACTIS/Site MIS Data

Note: Data show participation during the first nine months among all fathers randomly assigned to the program group, N=2,761 (by program: FFP=995; SS=338; CFF=822; TFP=556). Sites began PACT intake between 12/9/2012 and 2/13/2013.

Focus group participants discussed specific aspects of program structure that they felt helped them get their lives in order. Fathers at one integrated cohort program said they appreciated the strict rules about attendance and punctuality because it helped them develop accountability for their actions. Fathers at two programs appreciated how their foundational plans helped them both articulate clear goals for their lives moving forward and develop action steps they could take to achieve these goals.



### III. PARENTING AND CO-PARENTING



Positive father involvement is important for children’s development and well-being (Carlson 2006; Cancian et al. 2010, King and Sobolewski 2006)—a key reason that fatherhood programs encourage men’s engagement with their children through such services as parenting education. Father involvement can be facilitated or impeded by the quality of the co-parenting relationship, defined as the extent to which parents cooperate with one another in raising their child. Children whose parents work together to raise them—regardless of whether they are romantically involved with one another—are more likely to benefit than children whose parents do not (Adamsons and Johnson 2013). And fathers who do not live with their children tend to have greater contact when the co-parenting relationship is healthy (Sobolewski and King 2005; Waller 2012).

For these reasons, OFA’s fatherhood programs focus on parenting, and most also include some focus on improving co-parenting relationships. This chapter explores the circumstances and types of challenges low-income fathers in RF programs face when attempting to become more involved and effective parents including co-parenting relationships, the services that RF programs offer to address these needs, and relevant skills and lessons fathers reported gaining from engagement in these program activities.

#### **About half of PACT fathers were in contact with all of their children**

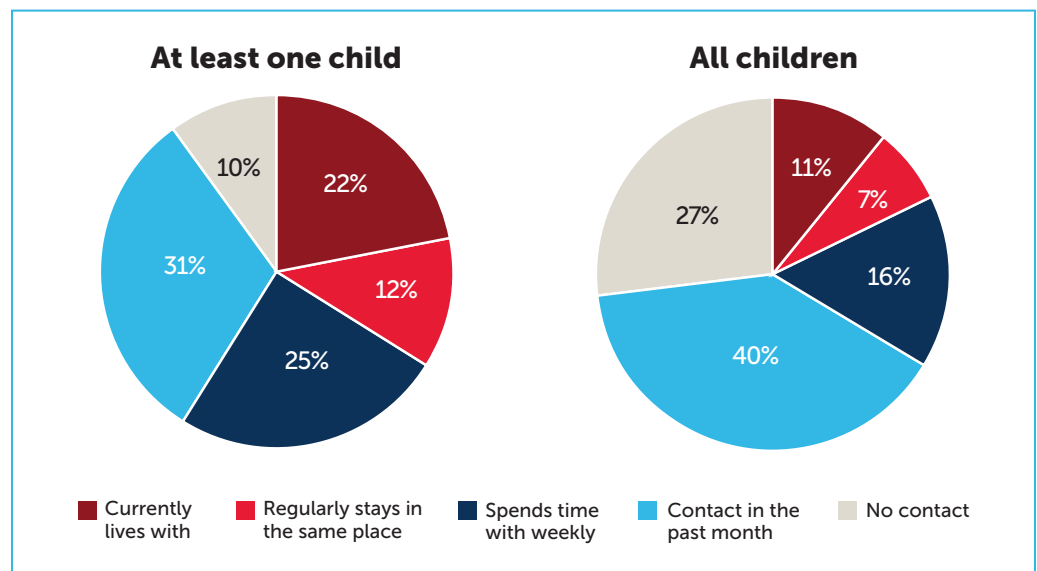
Fathers enrolled in PACT had, on average, between two and three children, and nearly half (46 percent) had children by multiple mothers. Most of the fathers—about two-thirds—were no longer romantically involved with any of the mothers of their children (see Chapter IV). Thus, fatherhood for most of these men at the time of their participation in PACT was experienced through the lens of living apart from some or all of their children.



Only about 18 percent of fathers either lived with (11 percent) or regularly stayed overnight with (7 percent) all of their children (Figure III.1, right panel). About half had some form of contact with their children in the month prior to enrollment. This included visiting in person, talking on the phone, or sending letters, cards, or text messages. About 27 percent of fathers reported not having any contact with all of their children.

Fathers were more likely to be living with (22 percent) or regularly staying overnight with (12 percent) at least one of their children (34 percent) than with all of their children, suggesting that some fathers were still living with their most recent partner (Figure III.1, left panel). The percentage of nonresidential fathers who had contact with their children in the month prior to enrollment was the same whether considering contact with at least one child or all of a father’s children (56 percent).

**Figure III.1. Frequency of fathers’ contact with their biological children**



Source: PACT Baseline Enrollment Survey

Note: N = 5,522. Sites began PACT intake between December 9, 2012 and February 13, 2013. All fathers randomly assigned were included. Percentages reflect contact with biological children under age 22.

**Fathers confronted barriers to fulfilling their desire to be more involved and give their children a better life**

During in-depth interviews, fathers tended to describe their main motivation for coming to RF programs as a desire to become more engaged and better parents. Yet, they faced formidable challenges that affected their ability to parent positively: growing up without a positive father role model due to the absence or limited involvement of their own fathers; complex and often conflicted co-parenting relationships with the mothers of their children; restricted access to their children due to perceived gatekeeping by their children’s mothers; and lack of legal visitation, custody or parenting time arrangements.

### **Despite their own fathers' absence, men longed to be better fathers and spend more time with their children**

During in-depth interviews, fathers elaborated on how and why they hoped to strengthen their connection with their children and “be a better father.” They described childhoods in which their own fathers had been absent or minimally involved in their lives. For these men, the experience of their own father’s absence while growing up was a singularly powerful and galvanizing force behind their current desire to be present and involved in the lives of their children. They wanted to learn effective parenting skills and how to be a positive role model for their children. Nearly three in four fathers who participated in the first round of in-depth interviews described how they viewed “just being there” for their children as a core part of responsible fatherhood. “Being there” consisted of opportunities to spend time with their children—being physically and emotionally there for them—even if they could not support their children financially. Fathers in the in-depth interviews expressed time and again that they still have much to offer their children, even when they cannot provide financially, and viewed “being there” as the most selfless thing a father can do for his child.

### **Men saw fatherhood as a catalyst for personal transformation**

For men in PACT, the father role became a powerful impetus to turn their often troubled lives around and connect with their children. Becoming a father or subsequently embracing the father role was often a life-changing event; it often served as a catalyst to transform their behavior in positive ways, rather than participate in negative, risk behaviors which often marked their past history (Caldwell 2010). More than a third of fathers who participated in the first round of in-depth interviews said that fatherhood brought about a shift in their life priorities, leading them to recognize “it’s not about me anymore.” Almost half shared the view that fatherhood drew them away from illegal activities and behaviors, summed up by the common observation that “if I didn’t have kids, I would probably be either dead or in prison.”

### **Co-parenting relationships were often conflicted and affected fathers' access to children**

During the first round of in-depth interviews, most fathers described their relationships with the mothers of their children as unstable and rife with conflict. According to many fathers, previous relationship issues (such as infidelity or lack of trust) and contentious breaks-ups had a lasting negative impact on their current relationship with the mothers of the children, and undermined efforts to co-parent effectively. Most co-parenting relationships were either marked by poor communication and verbal disagreements with their children’s mothers or they were tenuous, disengaged relationships, with little to no communication or co-parenting occurring between the parents (Friend et al. 2016).

“[I] tell her that, ‘You and me need to get along. We need to sit down and have a talk,’ but she’s like ‘Well, we don’t need to sit down and have a talk.’ I’m like, ‘Well, yeah we do, we have a whole child together.’”

—Martin

Sources of co-parenting relationship conflict most often involved issues concerning fathers' access to their children. Most fathers in conflicted co-parenting relationships struggled to establish or maintain contact with their children and were extremely frustrated over their lack of access. Fathers attributed this limited access primarily to maternal gatekeeping—mothers' behaviors that limit fathers' access to their children.<sup>2</sup> More than half of fathers participating in the first round of in-depth interviews offered accounts of gatekeeping behavior, ranging from refusing to grant physical access to making frequent last-minute schedule changes or withholding information from the father about the child. Other common sources of conflict and tension involved financial support for the children and disagreement over parenting approaches, particularly around discipline. Some described purposely limiting their communications with their children's mothers in an effort to reduce conflict, giving rise to a siloed approach to parenting.

You'll even have people in the classroom who think ... I have no rights to my child ... everything goes to the mom. [...] So they never even thought about going into a court of law to get a parenting plan.

—Lisle, program administrator, FFP

### Few fathers had shared custody or legal rights to visit their children

Because most of the fathers had never married the mothers of their children, they typically entered the RF programs lacking a custody, visitation or parenting time agreement (Holcomb et al. 2015; Dion et al. 2015).<sup>3</sup> Fathers were often eager for more information about their parental rights, as well as what steps they could take to secure those rights. About half of the fathers participating in the second round of in-depth interviews said they had at some point sought to ensure greater access through legal means, via parenting time agreements or custody awards. Lack of resources to pay for legal representation were often a significant barrier in petitioning courts for greater access.

### All RF programs offered a multi-session workshop on parenting

Programs in PACT offered group-based parenting workshops to provide both skills-based education and emotional support for parenting. Although the structure, intensity and specific content of parenting services varied by program, the group-based feature facilitated fathers' ability to receive peer support and encouragement from other fathers grappling with similar issues.

"... we teach them relationship building. So, if you want to be in your child's life, you have to deal with the mother."

—Andrew, workshop facilitator, FFP

### Parenting workshops typically covered child development, the meaning of fatherhood, and co-parenting

Each RF program used a different structured curriculum for its parenting workshop, but all included content on child development, the meaning of fatherhood, and co-parenting (Table III.2). Child development content was included to help fathers understand developmentally appropriate expectations and children's needs at different ages. To help participants enhance their understanding of what it means to be a man and a father, facilitators led fathers in discussions about the qualities, roles, and responsibilities of fathers and how parenting fits into their personal conceptions of manhood and masculinity. These topics could also be raised and addressed on

an ad hoc basis during workshop sessions even when not included in the formal curriculum. Programs included instruction in such techniques as non-confrontational communication to improve co-parenting skills and unlock access to children. Workshop curricula included a range of other topics, though not consistently across programs. These included parenting skills such as disciplinary strategies, handling challenges to effective parenting, such as stress or unexpected life events, and meeting child support obligations and navigating the child support system.

**Table III.2. Parenting curriculum topics in core group workshops**

	Integrated Cohort Programs		Open-Entry Workshop Programs	
	FFP	SS	CFF	TFP
<b>Parenting Curriculum<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Father Development: A Curriculum for Young Fathers (adapted)</b>	<b>Quenching the Father Thirst</b>	<b>Effective Black Parenting High Scope Early Childhood Curriculum</b>	<b>Young Dads/ Young Moms Nueva Familia</b>
<b>Selected Workshop Topics<sup>2</sup></b>				
What it means to be a father	✓	✓	✓	✓
Children’s development and needs	✓	✓	✓	✓
Co-parenting	✓	✓	✓	✓
Parenting role models and styles	✓	✓		✓
Disciplining children		✓	✓	✓
Communicating with children and establishing trust	✓	✓	✓	✓
The challenges of being a father	✓	✓		✓
Becoming involved in a child’s life	✓	✓		
Playing with your child	✓	✓		✓
Safety and nutrition	✓			✓
Establishing routines in the home				✓
Child support	✓	✓		✓
Being a non-residential father	✓	✓		
Declaring paternity	✓	✓		
Finding quality child care	✓			✓

Source: Site visits and program documents.

<sup>1</sup> Note: For more information about parenting workshop curricula, see program profiles in Zaveri et al. 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Table includes topics most directly related to parenting or co-parenting, to be consistent with how topics were coded for analyses of participation and dosage. Additional topics that were included in these parenting curricula and do not appear here are included in other chapters. For example, managing stress and anger are topics covered in some parenting curricula, but these appear in Table II.2 on personal development topics.

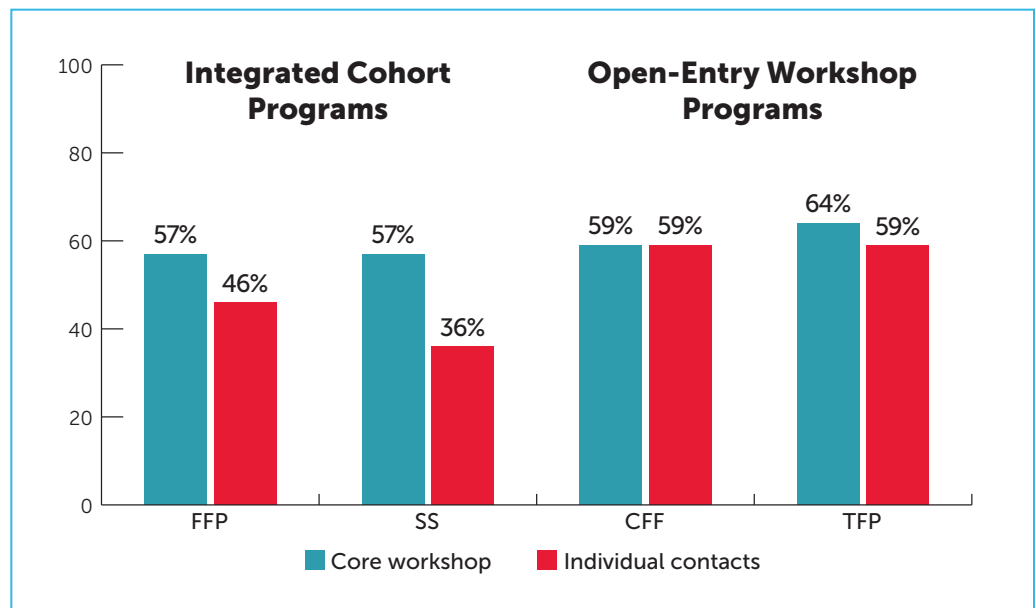
### The service delivery structure and intensity of parenting workshops varied, possibly affecting participation

Parenting workshops were held over a period of weeks or months, but the structure and intensity of offerings ranged widely across programs. Two programs integrated content on parenting with other workshop content and expected daily attendance over a period of two and a half to six weeks. These programs offered a total of up to 25 hours of parenting content in their integrated workshops. In contrast, the two open-entry programs held stand-alone parenting workshops once a week over 8 to 12 weeks, with each session lasting about 1.5-2 hours. The open-entry programs offered a total of between 12 and 24 hours of parenting content.

### The majority of fathers received content on parenting

Fathers could receive parenting content through workshops as well as individual-level contacts with program staff, such as case managers. Within nine months of enrollment, 57 to 64 percent of fathers participated in at least one workshop session focused on parenting, while 36 to 59 percent received some parenting content through individual contacts (Figure III.2).

**Figure III.2. Initial engagement in parenting content**



Source: PACTIS/Site MIS Data

Note: Data show participation during the first nine months among all fathers randomly assigned to the program group, N=2,761 (by program: FFP=995; SS=338; CFF=822; TFP=556). Data for individual contacts include those that lasted at least 5 minutes and did not occur by mail or leaving a message. Sites began PACT intake between 12/9/2012 and 2/13/2013.

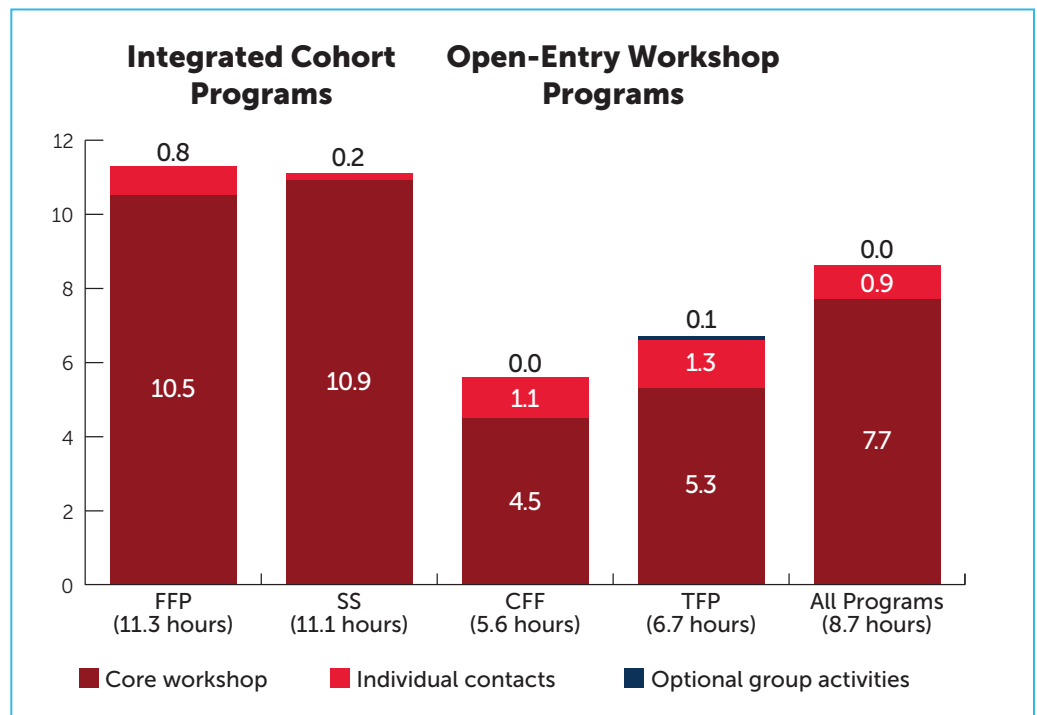
Analysis of participation data revealed that initial engagement in parenting workshops was slightly higher at the open-entry programs (Figure III.2), but fathers tended to participate longer and receive more parenting content at the integrated programs

"I watched [their] attitude go from ... rared up mad—she did, she that' to, "man, I like my child's mother ... you got to get [the father] to the mother to ever get to their child. So, you got to build that bridge back."  
 —Jeffrey, workshop facilitator, FFP

(Figure III.3). The open-entry weekly workshops may have made it possible for fathers to engage sooner than at integrated cohort programs that require waiting for enough people to enroll to form a new cohort.

Depending on the program, fathers received between 5.6 to 11.3 hours of parenting content on average (Figure III.3). Fathers attending integrated programs received about twice as much parenting content than fathers attending the open-entry programs, and most of the hours came from core workshop attendance. Fathers may have been more likely to receive a greater amount of parenting content in integrated programs because of the structure of these programs. Individual contacts also covered parenting topics, though, on average, the time spent discussing parenting during individual contacts was limited, ranging from 0.2 to 1.3 hours across programs. Fathers at the two open-entry workshop programs spent more time discussing parenting during individual contacts compared to fathers at the integrated cohort programs.

**Figure III.3. Average hours of participation in parenting services**



Source: PACTIS/Site MIS Data

Note: Data show participation during the first nine months among all fathers randomly assigned to the program group, N=2,761 (by program: FFP=995; SS=338; CFF=822; TFP=556). Data for individual contacts include those that lasted at least 5 minutes and did not occur by mail or leaving a message. Sites began PACT intake between 12/9/2012 and 2/13/2013.



## Fathers credited RF programs for helping them become better parents

Fathers generally believed that the RF programs were valuable in helping them become better parents. The findings from focus groups and the in-depth interviews with participants indicate that fathers felt that the programs helped them become more engaged, see the value in their role as a father, and learn new ways to interact with their children. Nevertheless, fathers still desired more access and time with their children and looked to the programs for help on this issue.

### Fathers believed that engagement with their children grew through program participation

During focus groups, fathers often said the program helped them come to a deeper understanding of the importance of their involvement with their children and empowered them to become more engaged. Fathers expressed an appreciation for the family events hosted by some programs and wished for more of these types of opportunities to spend time with their children. Fathers found content on how to communicate with their children helpful. Those with older children said that they appreciated learning how to better relate to them and rebuild relationships that had withered over time. During the in-depth interviews, fathers explained how the program helped them structure phone interactions with children with whom they had little physical contact, due to distance or a poor relationship with the mother of the child.

“... quality time is more priceless than money because you can buy somebody the world but not spend any time with them in loving them and showing them attention...”

—Amos

### Fathers resonated to the idea that they can offer their children more than financial support

Reinforcing the value of communicating and spending time with children affirmed for some fathers that even when they were having difficulty providing financially, there were other important ways to contribute. During the focus groups, fathers from two programs described how the program emphasized the importance of the father’s role in helping to raise children and be a positive influence, which helped them come to a deeper understanding of the importance of their involvement. This represented a shift for some men, who had believed before coming to the program that if they could not provide financially, they had little else to contribute. Fathers at one program highlighted the importance of spending “quality time” with children, and that buying presents was not enough to be a good parent.

### Fathers learned that their role could move beyond that of a disciplinarian

Fathers said they learned about alternatives to harsh disciplinary practices and that being a father was about more than being a disciplinarian, it also involved providing positive support through such activities as playing with their children. Fathers in the focus groups discussed how the program taught them what positive discipline looks like, such as active listening techniques, differences between “assertive” and

“Well, they have parenting classes, counseling, ... they had like a lot of events for fathers where we’d get together with our children and they teach us how to ... you know, just sit down and read with them or just sit down and listen to your kids or how to play with them or interact with your children.”

—Amos

“authoritarian” parenting, and warning signs of child abuse. Fathers in the in-depth interviews noted similar lessons related to discipline. Several said the program taught them alternatives to corporal punishment.

### **Fathers wanted more help with securing visitation, custody or parenting time**

In both the focus groups and in-depth interviews, fathers expressed appreciation for information about how to establish visitation, shared custody or parenting time agreements. Overall, fathers felt that the information was helpful, and a couple of fathers discussed the role the programs played in helping them secure visitation with their children.

Some fathers, however, had hoped for or expected more in the way of individualized legal assistance than they received from the programs. Fathers expressed disappointment because free or reduced-price legal representation for parenting time, visitation or custody agreements was seldom available through RF programs.<sup>4</sup> Lack of access to children continued to be a pervasive and persistent challenge for many of the fathers we interviewed over the course of several years. By the second round of the in-depth interviews (approximately one year after the initial in-depth interview), very few fathers had attempted to secure a custody or parenting time agreement and only about 12 percent had succeeded in doing so. Those who were successful described the process as long, difficult and expensive. Those who had not sought legal access offered various reasons, including not feeling prepared to support their children because of unemployment or having unstable or unsuitable housing for visiting children.

## IV. ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS AND MARRIAGE

While most of the fathers enrolled in PACT were no longer in romantic relationships with the mothers of their children, some had moved on to a new partner with whom they might share a child in the future. Research consistently shows that children who are raised by both of their parents in a stable and healthy relationship fare better than other children (Amato 2001). Prior research has suggested that economic hardship and related factors can undermine marriage and other romantic relationships (Conger et al. 2010; Bramlett and Mosher 2002). This chapter describes fathers' views of their romantic relationships and marital history at the time they enrolled in RF programs. The fathers' partners or ex-partners were not interviewed for this study; hence findings are based solely on fathers' reports and perceptions. The chapter then discusses the healthy marriage services offered by RF programs and fathers' participation in and responses to these services.

### About half of all fathers had a romantic partner, though these partners were not often the mothers of their children

About half of the fathers who enrolled in PACT were in a romantic relationship at baseline (Figure IV.1). Of those fathers, about 30 percent were still involved with the mother of at least one of their children, while about 20 percent were involved with a woman with whom they did not share a child. About 3 percent were involved in relationships with multiple women. Most romantically involved fathers reported being in steady relationships while others were in “on again, off again” relationships. The “on again, off again” relationships were more prevalent among fathers in a relationship with one of their children's mothers. Although relatively few fathers were married to anyone at the time of enrollment, 29 percent reported having been married at some point in the past, most of them to a mother of their children (Table IV.1).

“The first two years everything was like the honeymoon stage and then things just started getting bad ... We'd fight all the time ... Then we found out we were having [my son] so we tried to really like fix things together and for a while we were doing really good ... and [then] it didn't work.”

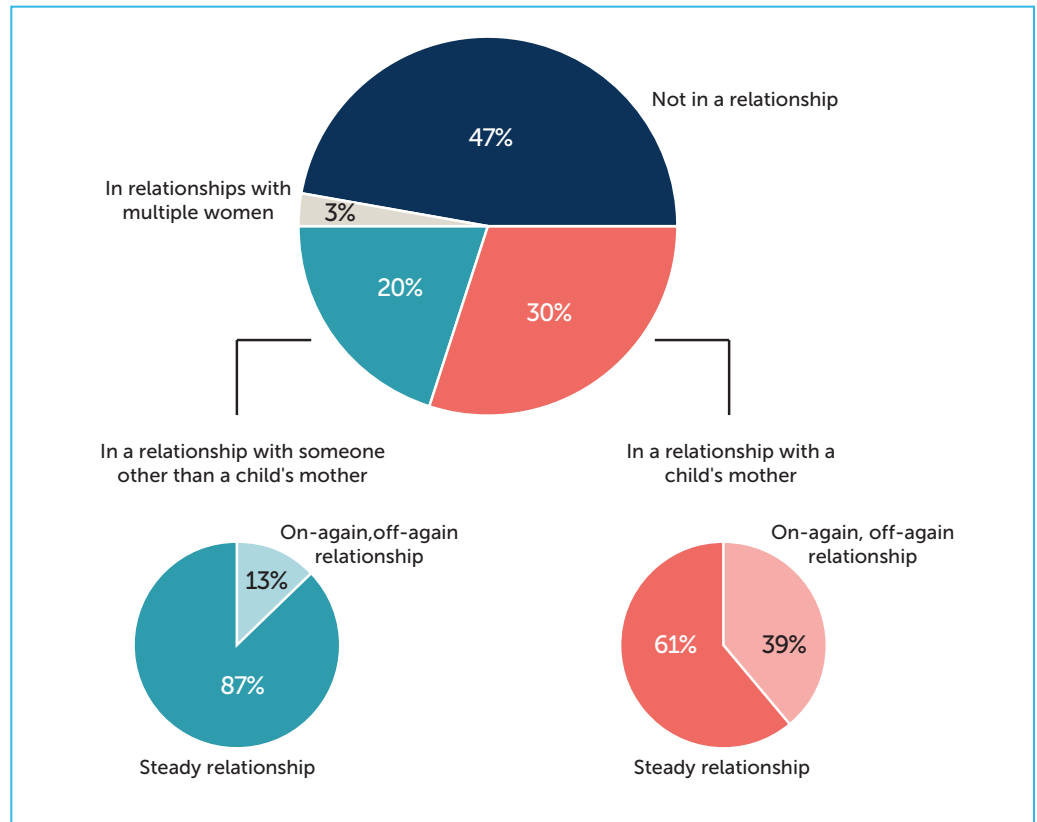
—Leroy

### Fathers often experienced troubled past romantic relationships

Fathers reported that past romantic relationships, particularly those with the mothers of their children, often became troubled, unstable, and fraught with conflict. Without strong role models for healthy relationships and marriage in their own families of origin and in their communities, many fathers reported being involved in a series of short-term or “on again, off again” relationships that often unintentionally resulted in children.

Most men interviewed for the first round of the qualitative study became fathers for the first time while still in their teens or early 20s and some attributed past relationship troubles to immaturity. Learning that their partner was pregnant often spurred men to build, or rebuild, a romantic relationship with the mother, at least during the period before and soon after the birth. But, according to the fathers, these romantic

**Figure IV.1. Relationship status of enrolled fathers**



Source: PACT Baseline Enrollment Survey

Note: N=5,522. Sites began PACT intake between December 9, 2012 and February 13, 2013. All fathers randomly assigned were included.

**Table IV.1. Marital status and history of enrolled fathers**

	Integrated Cohort Programs		Open-Entry Workshop Programs		Total Sample
	FFP	SS	CFF	TFP	
Currently married (%)	10	9	7	9	9
Ever married (%)	29	34	30	25	29
Ever married to mother of at least one child (%)	27	32	29	23	27
<b>Sample size</b>	<b>1,994</b>	<b>779</b>	<b>1,643</b>	<b>1,106</b>	<b>5,522</b>

Source: PACT Baseline Enrollment Survey

Note: Sites began PACT intake between December 9, 2012 and February 13, 2013. All fathers randomly assigned were included.

relationships were often riddled with stress and eventually ended because of mistrust, infidelity, and arguments that sometimes escalated out of control.

**RF programs offered education in healthy marriage and relationship skills**

To address fathers’ romantic relationships, programs in PACT offered group-based workshops that provided education in healthy marriage and relationship skills.

Although the content and structure of healthy marriage workshops varied by program, the group-based approach allowed fathers to learn and receive encouragement from other fathers grappling with similar issues.



### **Marriage and relationship workshops focused primarily on the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy romantic relationships**

The programs in PACT drew on three different healthy marriage and relationship skills curricula that covered a range of topics (Table IV.2). The most frequently covered topics were relationship roles and expectations; characteristics of healthy marriage and relationships, building trust and intimacy, and avoiding domestic violence. Three programs partnered with staff from local domestic violence agencies who provided presentations during workshops. Depending on the program, healthy marriage and relationship education workshops also focused on communication and conflict management, financial management, and relationship barriers. Three programs encouraged women to participate in healthy marriage and relationship education services, either by attending with the father or by participating in a separate workshop designed especially for female partners.

"... when we first were talking about relationships [topics], it just didn't resonate with the dads because they weren't in a relationship or weren't interested in having that relationship. So, we had to change how we talked about it ... really looked at the greater point of this is really about improved communication."

—Brandi, program administrator, SS

As discussed in Chapter III, fathers who are no longer romantically involved with their children's mothers must nevertheless remain in contact with the custodial parent in order to access the child, and ideally, to work together in raising the child (co-parenting). Since all participants in PACT had at least one child, co-parenting was a subject of great relevance for these fathers. Co-parenting was typically covered during parenting workshops, but was touched upon in the healthy marriage workshop of one program.

**Table IV.2. Topics in healthy marriage and relationship workshops**

	Integrated Cohort Programs		Open-Entry Workshop Programs	
	FFP	SS	CFF	TFP
<b>Marriage and Relationship Curriculum</b>	<b>Within My Reach</b>	<b>Ready for Love</b>	<b>Nurturing Skills for Families</b>	<b>Within My Reach</b>
<b>Selected Workshop Topics<sup>1</sup></b>				
Roles and expectations	✓	✓	✓	✓
Characteristics of healthy relationships	✓	✓	✓	✓
Making active choices in a relationship	✓	✓		✓
Domestic violence	✓	✓	✓	✓
Communication and conflict management	✓	✓	✓	✓
Building trust and intimacy	✓	✓	✓	✓
Infidelity and forgiveness	✓			✓
Barriers to relationships	✓			

Source: Site visits and program documents.

<sup>1</sup> Note: Table includes topics most directly related to healthy marriage and relationships, to be consistent with how topics were coded for analyses of participation and dosage. Additional topics that were included in these curricula and do not appear here are included in other chapters. For example, financial management was included in some relationship workshops but is shown in the chapter on economic stability topics.

Information and content on healthy marriage and relationships was not always limited to the marriage and relationship workshops. Programs occasionally covered topics related to romantic relationships during their parenting workshop. For example, one parenting workshop discussed how to choose a suitable romantic partner.

### **Three of the four programs offered healthy marriage and relationship education as a standalone service to be completed after other program components**

The workshops on healthy marriage and relationships were offered as a standalone component in most programs. The two open-entry programs and the partially-integrated cohort program (the Successful STEPS programs [SS]) structured their services to deliver healthy marriage and relationship workshops separately from parenting and economic stability workshops. The healthy marriage and relationship education workshops at open-entry programs offered sessions once a week over 8 to 12 weeks, for a total of 12-24 hours of content, while the partially integrated cohort program with a standalone relationship workshop offered 7 weekly sessions for a total of 14 hours.

Perhaps because not all participants were in romantic relationships but all were fathers, most programs tended to encourage fathers to complete parenting education and economic stability components first. The exception was the fully integrated FFP



program, which built content on healthy marriage and relationships directly into its six-week program along with other content on parenting and economic stability. A total of 20 hours of healthy marriage and relationships content was offered through FFP’s integrated cohort workshop.

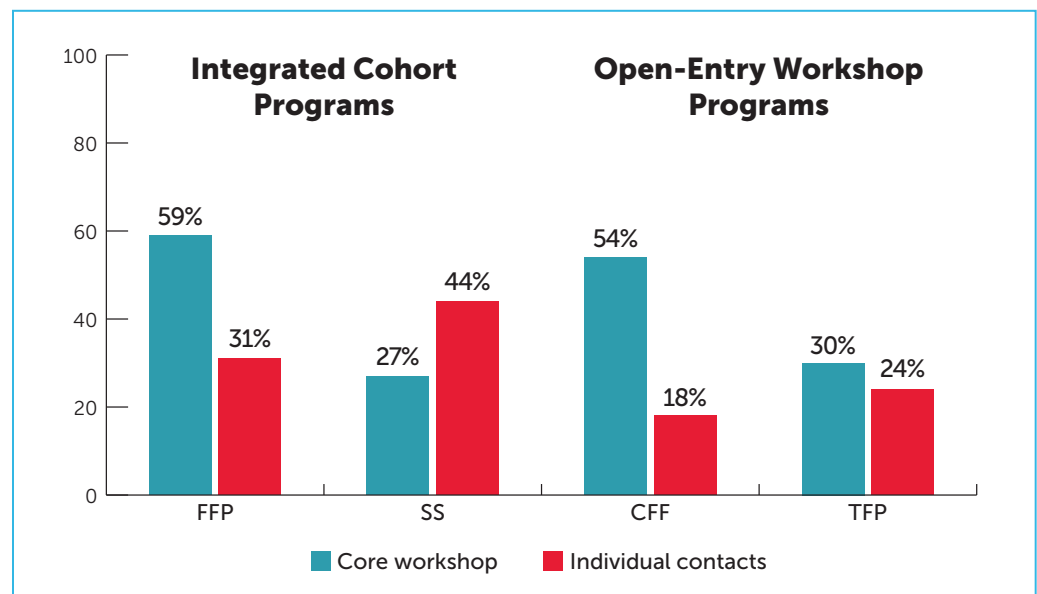
“I think the challenge was that a lot of the guys, they weren’t ready, in my real honest opinion, to bring their relationship stuff to the forefront, within a program that they originally sought out to really address their individual issues.”  
 —Guy, program administrator, TFP

**Participation in healthy marriage and relationship education varied but was highest at the fully integrated program**

Within nine months of enrollment, 27 to 59 percent of fathers attended at least one workshop session addressing healthy marriage and relationships (Figure IV.2). Across programs, the percentage of fathers attending a healthy marriage and relationship workshop at least once was highest in the fully integrated program (FFP, 59 percent), and lowest at the partially integrated program that offered healthy marriage and relationship education as a standalone component to be completed after the combined parenting and economic stability workshop (SS, 27 percent). Initial attendance was also relatively high (CFF, 54 percent) at one of the non-integrated programs.

Fathers sometimes discussed relationships during individual-level contacts with program staff, such as case managers, although the amount of time spent in such individual discussions was on average extremely small. Across programs, 18 to 44 percent of fathers received marriage or relationship content at least once through an individual-level contact. SS, which had the lowest initial attendance at its standalone healthy marriage and relationship workshop, also saw the highest percentage of fathers discussing relationships during individual-level contacts.

**Figure IV.2. Initial engagement in healthy marriage and relationship services**



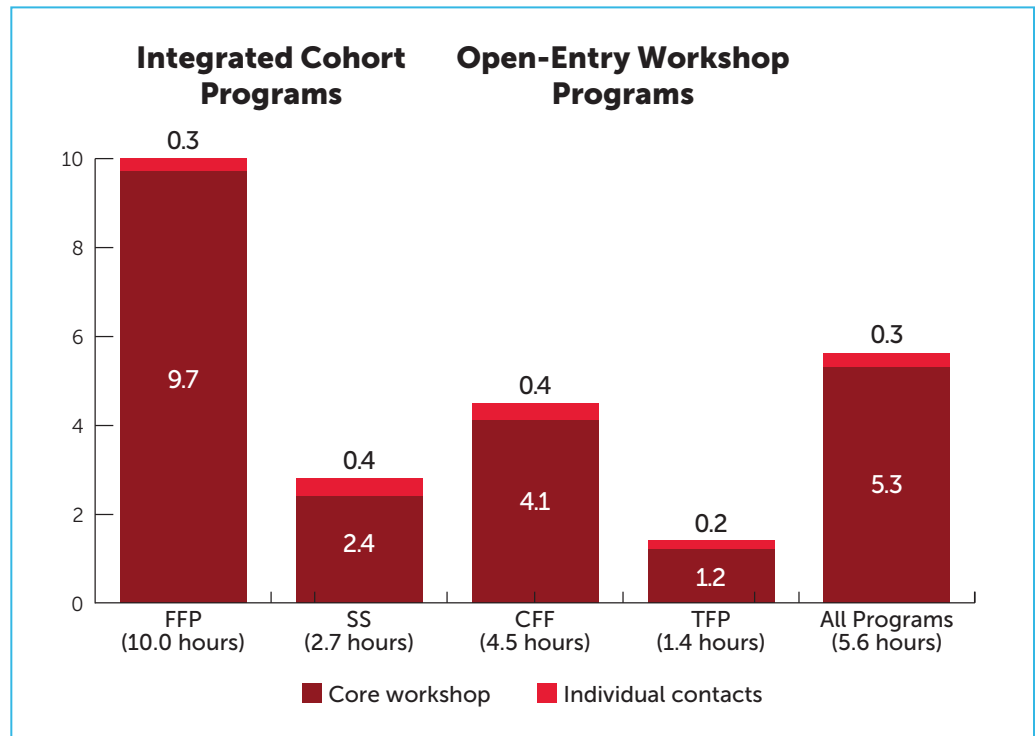
Source: PACTIS/Site MIS Data

Note: Data show participation during the first nine months among all fathers randomly assigned to the program group, N=2,761 (by program: FFP=995; SS=338; CFF=822; TFP=556). Data for individual contacts include those that lasted at least 5 minutes and did not occur by mail or leaving a message. Sites began PACT intake between 12/9/2012 and 2/13/2013.

**Fathers in the fully integrated program received a higher number of hours in healthy marriage and relationship education compared to other programs**

The total number of hours of healthy marriage and relationship education content received by fathers—regardless of delivery mode—ranged widely across programs (Figure IV.3), with dosage more than twice as high at the fully integrated program (10 hours) compared to other programs (1.4 to 4.5 hours).

**Figure IV.3. Average hours of participation in healthy marriage and relationship services**



Source: PACTIS/Site MIS Data

Note: Data show participation during the first nine months among all fathers randomly assigned to the program group, N=2,761 (by program: FFP=995; SS=338; CFF=822; TFP=556). Data for individual contacts include those that lasted at least 5 minutes and did not occur by mail or leaving a message. Sites began PACT intake between 12/9/2012 and 2/13/2013.

Participation may have been low at some programs because fathers thought the information wasn't relevant to them or because they were more interested in co-parenting relationships. Only one-half of the sample was in a romantic relationship at baseline, with just 9 percent who were married. Alternatively (or in addition), fathers may not have realized the importance of information on healthy marriage for their current or future relationships. Relatively few fathers enrolled in the RF program to get help for marital or romantic relationships. One way to ensure that more fathers receive this content is to integrate it into other services they are more likely to engage in. Fathers received nearly twice as much healthy marriage content at FFP, the only fully integrated program, compared to other programs in PACT.

## Fathers reported gaining valuable relationship skills

Despite low participation in healthy marriage and relationship services at some programs, fathers who participated in focus groups or in-depth interviews reported they found the content helpful. In both focus groups and in-depth interviews, fathers credited the RF programs with helping them to learn skills to better communicate and manage conflict with partners and to recognize a healthy relationship.

## Fathers described communication and conflict management skills

The majority of fathers interviewed reported using communication and conflict management skills they learned in the RF program. Many of these fathers were in current romantic relationships and stated that they used the skills with their partners. Fathers most commonly discussed using active listening techniques to express their opinions, emotions, and needs. Fathers also talked about using various strategies to manage their anger, such as taking a break during an argument. Some fathers discussed how these skills helped them improve their conversations around money and finances with their current romantic partners or with the mothers of their children with whom they were no longer romantically involved.

"... another thing that helped me with my relationship with [partner] ... [I] started listening more instead of always talking or trying to be controversial. Now that I do that, I see she's more calmer, she's more easy to tell me things now."

—Carl

Fathers who were currently living with one of the mothers of their children tended to report using the relationship skills to improve how they communicated and co-parented with their partner. Although the second round of in-depth interviews took place at least one year after the fathers had participated in the RF programs, almost one-quarter of fathers described how the programs had helped them, in small ways, to navigate their residential co-parenting relationships. These fathers described using communication skills to express their thoughts about child-rearing with their partners. This included skills on how to be an active and assertive father and how to set aside personal differences for the benefit of the child and make joint parenting decisions.

A few fathers reported that they still experienced conflict when co-parenting with their children's mothers, even when using skills they learned in the RF program. Some of these fathers attributed the persistence of relationship problems to the fact that the mother had not received similar training in relationship skills. These fathers reported continuing to nevertheless use the techniques they had learned.

"I learned that ... some of the things that go on in a relationship that shows if it is a destructive relationship or a relationship that can be worked out."

—Randall

## Fathers reported learning how to identify healthy relationships

Many fathers, particularly those who attended CFF, described how they learned about characteristics of healthy marriage and relationships, prompting them to reflect on their behavior in past relationships. They reported coming to recognize how some behaviors, such as being emotionally manipulative and self-centered, may have sabotaged these relationships. Some fathers also reported learning that they should make a conscious choice to end negative and harmful relationships. Fathers also described learning to identify boundaries for both themselves and their partners and the importance of respecting these relationship boundaries.

## V. ECONOMIC STABILITY



Providing economic support for children is a key component of responsible parenting and is essential to promoting children’s development and well-being. Research has also shown that fathers who are employed and have higher levels of education are more likely to be involved with their children as they age (Coley and Chase-Lansdale 1999, Coley and Hernandez 2006). Unemployment and other economic factors contribute to stress and low self-worth, which may lead to more negative behaviors between parents and children (Rosenberg and Wilcox 2006).

Recognizing the importance of economic stability for fathers’ ability to provide financially for their children and for positive father involvement, the RF grant required programs to provide economic stability services. These services are primarily intended to help fathers develop skills for finding and retaining employment. This chapter describes fathers’ economic circumstances, the economic stability services programs provided, and fathers’ responses to these services.

### **Most fathers in PACT experienced job instability and faced multiple barriers to stable employment and income**

Prior to enrolling in PACT, most fathers had experienced unemployment and low earnings (Table V.1). Baseline data indicate that although about half the fathers were unemployed in the month prior to enrollment, 70 percent had worked in the six months prior to enrollment, suggesting a substantial degree of job instability. Among those who were employed in the month prior to enrollment, earnings were low. About half of fathers reported earning less than \$500 in the prior month, while a quarter reported that they earned between \$500 and \$1,000. About one-third of fathers indicated that they enrolled in the RF program to improve their job situation.

**Table V.1. Economic stability characteristics of enrolled fathers**

	Integrated Cohort Programs		Open-Entry Workshop Programs		Total Sample
	FFP	SS	CFF	TFP	
Worked for pay in last 30 days (%)	53	46	43	62	51
Worked for pay in last 6 months (%)	73	68	62	78	70
Earnings in last 30 days among employed fathers (%)					
No earnings	0	0	0	0	0
\$1 - \$500	60	70	45	39	52
\$501-\$1,000	24	19	26	26	25
More than \$1,001	16	11	29	35	23
<b>Sample size</b>	<b>1,994</b>	<b>779</b>	<b>1,643</b>	<b>1,106</b>	<b>5,522</b>

Source: PACT Baseline Enrollment Survey

Note: Sites began PACT intake between December 9, 2012 and February 13, 2013. All fathers randomly assigned were included.

"Temp service is like, you work today, you get paid today."

—D'Angelo

### Fathers who were employed had low-paying, unstable jobs at baseline

Employed fathers who participated in in-depth interviews tended to describe low-paying jobs that were temporary or had unsteady schedules. Most commonly, they worked in foodservice, construction, maintenance, landscaping, or warehouse work. About 30 percent worked in seasonal positions or for temporary staffing agencies that placed men in short-term positions. Though they generally felt that some work was better than none, these men couldn't count on a consistent paycheck, which made it difficult to know whether they'd be able to pay their child support or cover their own necessities like food and rent.

### Low education, criminal histories and small social networks likely constrained fathers' job prospects

Low educational attainment limited the types of jobs fathers could obtain and capped their earnings potential. More than 30 percent of fathers lacked a high school diploma or equivalent at enrollment (Table II.1). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2015, individuals over 25 without a high school diploma earned less than half as much per week, on average, as those with a bachelor's degree, and faced an unemployment rate three times as high.

"I know with my record there ain't many options left for me. I wish I would have thought about that when I was younger too. This is my life. I don't know if I want to be a roofer until I retire."

—Darvin

At baseline, more than 70 percent of fathers had past criminal records (Table II.1), which likely limited the types of jobs in which they could work. Felony convictions can mean that many jobs, such as those requiring the handling of money or merchandise (such as in a bank or warehouse), alcohol (such as at a bar or restaurant), or use of firearms (such as a security guard), are off-limits. Fathers in the RF programs sometimes struggled to find even low-paying, unskilled jobs in fields such as foodservice and construction, due in part to their criminal history (Holcomb et al. 2015).

Social networking can be useful in finding work opportunities, but few fathers had robust networks (D'Angelo et al. 2016). Fathers participating in in-depth interviews reported few social or organizational connections that could lead to employment or better jobs. The majority had four or fewer connections to family and friends, compared to the national average of 23 (Boase 2006).

### Fathers relied on a variety of strategies to generate income

Given the high level of unemployment among fathers and their meager incomes, fathers had to rely on a variety of strategies to get by, including panhandling or under-the-table work. More than one-third of fathers who participated in in-depth interviews relied sporadically on odd jobs to make ends meet, including home repair, car maintenance, and landscaping (Holcomb et al. 2015). Some fathers, often those with more robust social networks, relied on their families and other connections to help them find odd jobs, meals, and sometimes, a place to sleep. Despite the instability of fathers' financial situations, few fathers talked about receiving government assistance. Fathers who did receive government assistance, typically received SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefits, SSI/SSDI (Supplemental Security Income/Social Security Disability Insurance), general assistance, or unemployment insurance (D'Angelo et al. 2016).

"My brother came through, man ... 'I got a couple yards for you to cut.' Like that ... then two, a few, they add up and I give it to my kids."

—Jair

"I wish somebody would hire me. ... I know for a fact you can't just live off no ... \$900-something dollars. That's just to pay a bill, pay your rent and probably a light bill or something."

—Ed

### RF programs offered group and individual services to advance economic stability

RF programs offered various types of services to help fathers obtain employment and improve their economic stability. Common across the RF programs was a group-based workshop addressing job readiness topics. The two open-entry workshop programs offered a seven-hour workshop, either as weekly one-hour sessions or as a single one-day event. At the two integrated cohort programs, economic stability content was built into the daily, multi-week workshop. SS devoted the majority of its integrated workshop time to work readiness, with up to 50 hours of content. FFP integrated work readiness topics into its single core workshop, but went beyond this to also expect daily engagement in self-directed activities to advance work readiness, as described below.

Across programs, economic stability workshops covered similar topics aimed at helping participants prepare for, obtain and retain employment (Table V.2). Staff provided training to help fathers identify suitable jobs they were interested in, apply for jobs, and develop a cover letter and resume that would be likely to get them a job interview. To help fathers succeed in a job interview, the programs taught fathers how to answer difficult questions about their history and experiences and conducted mock interviews with them. Workshops also addressed job retention by focusing on strategies for job retention, workplace culture, and setting realistic career expectations.



**Table V.2. Economic stability topics in core workshops**

	Integrated Cohort Programs		Open-Entry Workshop Programs	
	FFP	SS	CFF	TFP
<b>Selected Workshop Topics<sup>1</sup></b>				
Completing a job application	✓	✓	✓	✓
Developing resumes and cover letters	✓	✓	✓	✓
Interview techniques	✓	✓	✓	✓
Job searching	✓	✓	✓	✓
Positive work attitudes and professionalism	✓	✓	✓	✓
Self-confidence	✓	✓	✓	✓
Job retention strategies	✓	✓		✓
Skill interest and assessment		✓	✓	✓
Workplace culture	✓	✓		
Barriers to employment	✓			
Banking, budgeting, finances, and goal setting	✓		✓	✓
Setting realistic career expectations			✓	

Source: Site visits and program documents.

<sup>1</sup>Note: Table includes topics most directly related to economic stability, to be consistent with how topics were coded for analyses of participation and dosage.

One program went far beyond including economic stability content in a workshop. FFP expected fathers to engage in individually-tailored activities each afternoon (up to 120 hours over six weeks) until they obtained employment. Designed to increase fathers' basic education levels and workplace skills, these activities were often self-directed, intensive, and sustained. They included such activities as computer literacy classes, high school equivalency programming, and a "practicum," or unpaid on-the-job community service intended to help them gain real-world job experience. As part of FFP's fully integrated model, these activities were not considered optional, but rather were required of all unemployed fathers as part of the core workshop.

Employment staff at the other three programs also offered individual-level employment support to fathers, however these activities were not designed to teach skills or provide experience. Examples of individual-level activities at these programs include skills and interest assessments and job development activities (Table V.3).

**Table V.3. Individual-level economic stability services**

	Integrated Cohort Programs		Open-Entry Workshop Programs	
	FFP	SS	CFF	TFP
Employment-focused case management	✓	✓	✓	✓
Resource room with Internet access for job search	✓	✓	✓	✓
Skills and interest assessment	✓	✓	✓	✓
Individualized employment plan	✓	✓		✓
Job development	✓	✓		✓
Program-supervised job practicum	✓			
High school equivalency exam preparation	✓			✓

Source: Site visits and program documents.

“When people are riddled with doubt, they have huge holes in their self-esteem bucket. They need someone to champion them and give them the strength and courage to move along ... We can show them that resume and say ‘Now, look at this. Here is a list of things, skills, talents, and abilities that ... an employer would pay you for.’”

—Stan, program administrator, CFF

A key goal of employment services centered on empowering fathers to persist in the hard work of job seeking. In many cases, this meant helping to improve their self-confidence. One way staff tried to increase self-confidence was by helping them see that they already had some job skills from previous otherwise negative experiences. For example, fathers who previously had sold drugs often had customer service and math skills that could be useful in the workplace. Another way that programs tried to increase fathers’ self-confidence was to stick with fathers throughout their job-seeking ups and downs, showing that they believed in their ability to eventually get a job. To help promote job retention, all programs provided financial incentives to fathers who stayed employed for 30, 60, and 90 days.

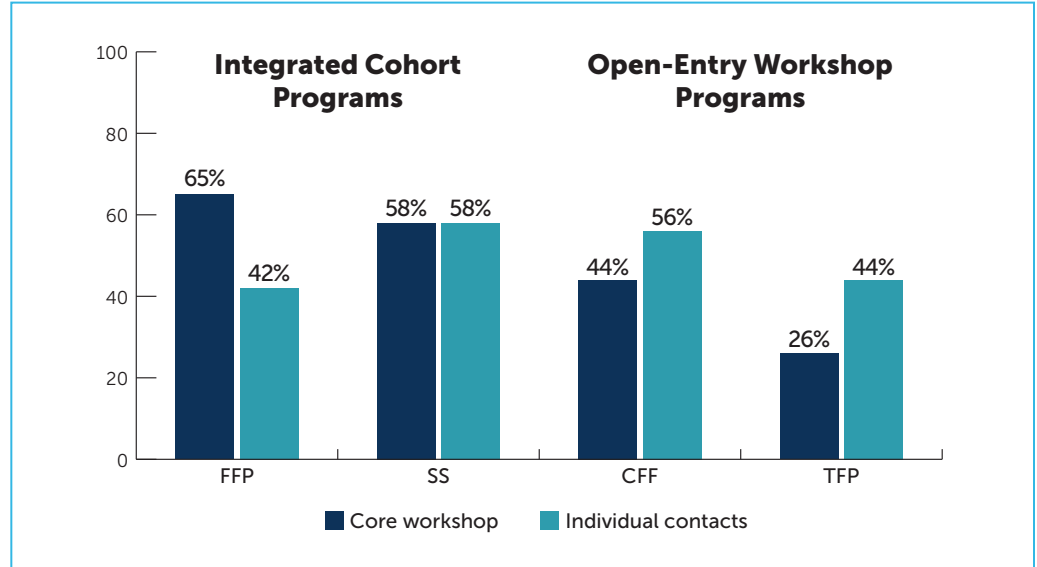
### Fathers were more likely to engage and participate in economic stability activities at integrated programs

The two integrated cohort programs saw higher initial engagement in economic stability services through workshops and self-directed activities<sup>6</sup> (58 to 65 percent), relative to the open-entry workshop programs (26 to 44 percent). On average, roughly half of fathers also engaged in individual-level economic stability services across programs (Figure V.1).

### One program stood out for its high dosage of economic stability services

Fathers received a much higher dosage of economic stability services at the program that expected daily afternoon engagement in individually-tailored services over six weeks. Fathers at FFP received 46.6 hours of this content compared to 12.2 hours at

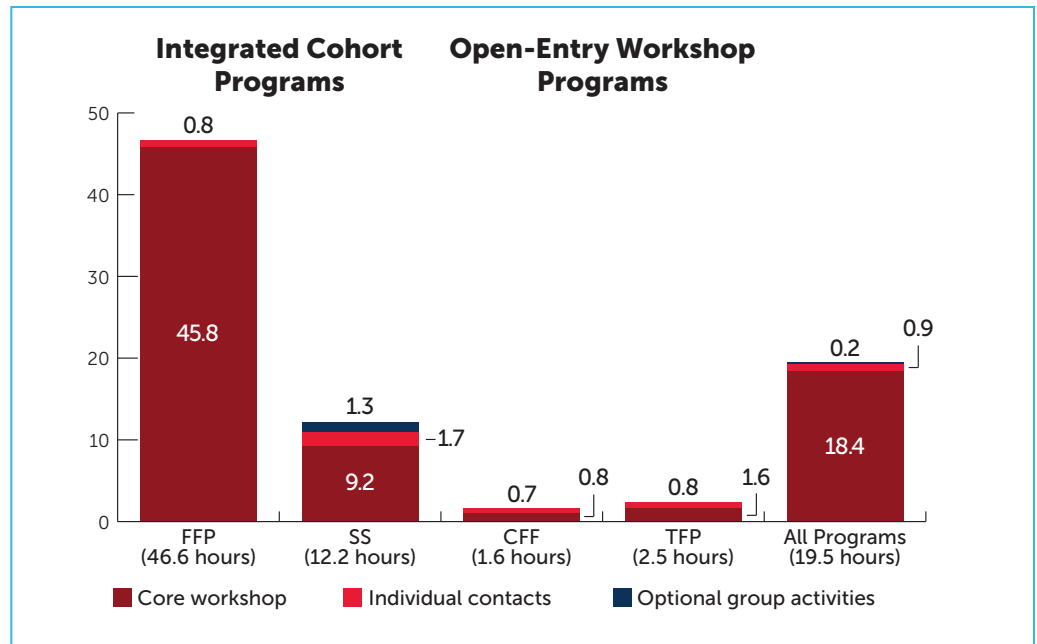
**Figure V.1. Initial engagement in economic stability content**



Source: PACTIS/Site MIS Data

Note: Data show participation during the first nine months among all fathers randomly assigned to the program group, N=2,761 (by program: FFP=995; SS=338; CFF=822; TFP=556). Data for individual contacts include those that lasted at least 5 minutes and did not occur by mail or leaving a message. Sites began PACT intake between 12/9/2012 and 2/13/2013. The afternoon activities tailored to each father’s economic stability needs at FFP were counted as part of FFP’s economic stability workshop.

**Figure V.2. Average hours of participation in economic stability services**



Source: PACTIS/Site MIS Data

Note: Data show participation during the first nine months among all fathers randomly assigned to the program group, N=2,761 (by program: FFP=995; SS=338; CFF=822; TFP=556). Hours at FFP include individually-tailored afternoon activities. Data for individual contacts include those that lasted at least 5 minutes and did not occur by mail or leaving a message. Sites began PACT intake between 12/9/2012 and 2/13/2013.

Core workshop hours at FFP include the individually-tailored afternoon activities, which the program required for all unemployed fathers.

"My employment case manager would not quit. ... I wouldn't come in for a week and she called ..."

—Focus group participant

"I have not picked up a job from it yet. ... So am I happy with that? No, but I'm ... not out there beating my head ... because I know my next move is to get my butt up in the morning, take that shower, put your shoes on, and hit the street, and get going. You know, make it."

—Focus group participant

the other integrated cohort program. Fathers at the open-entry workshop programs received just 1.6 to 2.5 hours, on average.

### Fathers credited RF programs with teaching concrete skills and improving their outlooks

Fathers who participated in economic stability services were pleased with the help they received. In focus groups, fathers at each program reported that they learned specific job-seeking skills, including how to develop a resume, complete an online job application, and answer sensitive questions in a job interview, particularly questions about past felony convictions and jail time. Fathers who participated in focus groups at three programs reported that employment case managers helped get them into job training programs, such as forklift driver training and an Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) workplace safety certification class.

Many fathers retained a positive outlook when we spoke to them, even though many job leads had not panned out and program participation might not yet have translated into employment. Fathers in focus groups recognized that they had to take an active role in finding employment, and the programs would continue to help them if they stayed motivated.

### Getting employment remained a challenge for some

Fathers who participated in either in-depth interviews or a focus group described incarceration records as a major roadblock that the programs struggled to help men overcome. Programs sought out "felon friendly" job listings to share with fathers, but fathers in focus groups at two programs noted that they had been referred to jobs for which they were ineligible, including a position at a hospital. Fathers at both of these programs had job offers rescinded because they failed criminal background checks.

## VI. FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF CHILDREN



"I was basically working for child support. You know, if I grossed an \$1100 check, by the time child support and the taxes came out, I was lucky if I brought home \$220, \$230 bucks every two weeks ... And that's working 80 hours."

—Everett

As described in previous chapters, most fathers in PACT entered programs with low levels of education, earnings, and job stability. These circumstances affected their ability to not only support themselves but to provide financially for their children. This chapter describes how fathers provided financial support for their children including their experiences with the child support system, how programs helped fathers navigate the child support system, and how fathers viewed program assistance related to child support.<sup>6</sup>

### **Economic instability undermined fathers' ability to provide financially**

According to in-depth interviews, all fathers wanted to provide financially for their children, but their job instability made it difficult, and often impossible, to provide financially for their children, whether or not they had a child support order.

### **Many fathers struggled to pay child support and were often in arrears**

At baseline, more than half of the fathers (58 percent) had legal child support orders for at least one child (Table VI.1). About 43 percent of fathers with a child support order made a payment in the month prior to enrollment; these payments averaged \$153. In most cases, fathers' child support payments were withheld from their paychecks. Due to their low wages and intermittent employment, even working fathers often had trouble getting by after paying child support.

Fathers' child support obligations were often in arrears because of spells of unemployment or incarceration. Only about half (51 percent) had worked for pay

“... when a man is incarcerated or hasn’t been able to pay his child support ... then it goes into arrears ... and now all he’s able to get is a temp job at a temp agency paying minimum wage. How does he afford a place to live? How does he afford transportation? How does he afford health care?”

—Stan, workshop facilitator, CFF

in the month preceding program enrollment, and almost three-quarters of fathers in PACT had been previously incarcerated. Child support obligations continue to accrue regardless of a father’s ability to pay, and are added to monthly obligation amounts, with fathers falling further into debt. Nearly two-thirds of fathers who completed the first in-depth interview told us they owed between \$1,000 and \$100,000 or more in back child support and arrears.

### Fathers provided financial support outside of the child support system

According to in-depth interviews, about half of the fathers without child support orders were either living with their children and contributing to the household, while another nearly one-third were not living with their children but providing financial support outside the child support system. This “informal” support included giving cash directly to mothers of their children and providing non-cash support, such as buying food, clothes, school supplies or toys for their children. Such informal contributions tended to be sporadic and dependent on whether the father was working. The cash amount of a single informal contribution varied from a few dollars to a few hundred, according to fathers. According to the baseline survey, nearly half of fathers who provided informal financial support did not have a formal child support order.

**Table VI.1. Fathers’ Financial Support of Children at Baseline**

	Integrated Cohort Programs		Open-Entry Workshop Programs		Total Sample
	FFP	SS	CFF	TFP	
Had legal child support arrangement for at least one child (%)	67	59	40	67	58
Did not have legal child support arrangement (%)	33	41	60	33	42
Of those with a legal child support arrangement					
Paid in last 30 days (%)	42	38	46	46	43
Did not pay in last 30 days (%)	58	62	54	54	56
Amount of child support paid in last 30 days (\$)	150	93	164	189	153
Informal support					
Paid informal support in the last 30 days (%)	164	25	30	35	31
Of those who provided informal support, had no legal child support arrangement (%)	189	46	61	38	46
<b>Sample size</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>779</b>	<b>1,643</b>	<b>1,106</b>	<b>5,522</b>

Source: PACT Baseline Enrollment Survey

Note: Sites began PACT intake between December 9, 2012 and February 13, 2013. All fathers randomly assigned were included.



## Fathers described challenging experiences with child support and steep consequences for noncompliance

"A large need for them is driver's license reinstatement. One of the penalties of not paying your child support in [this state] is to lose your driver's license, and this is an important part of their working."

—Mary, co-located child support staff, TFP

"So we talk about how arrears accrue. The enforcement tools that the division of child support enforcement has ... and we talk about criminal nonsupport. Because here in [this state] if you're 12 months behind, the prosecutor can charge you with a Class D felony."

"And most people think, if I have a child support order and I'm paying this lady money, I should be able to visit my kid."

—Lisle, program administrator, FFP

Fathers with child support orders expressed frustration with the system. These frustrations were related to difficulty modifying orders to reflect their actual income, penalties for nonpayment, and policies that they viewed as undervaluing their non-financial contributions as fathers.

Noncustodial parents may petition the court to adjust their child support orders in response to changes in their economic circumstances, but fathers experienced difficulty and varying degrees of success in getting their orders modified. About half of all fathers with child support orders who participated in the second round of in-depth interviews had, at some point in their lives, tried to get their orders modified downward or get their arrearages reduced to be more in line with their income. About half were successful in this endeavor. The fathers who told us they applied for a modification but did not succeed described confusion about the process, or believed that lack of legal representation harmed their chance of success.

Living under the constant threat of penalties for noncompliance with child support orders was a source of stress for many fathers because such penalties could lead to even greater difficulty meeting their obligations. Fathers spoke about jobs that were sometimes threatened or lost as a result of having their drivers' licenses suspended for falling behind in their child support, being required to appear in court over a late or missed payment, and in a few cases, jailed for nonpayment of child support.

Fathers felt that the child support system undervalued the emotional and social support that fathers can provide their children, because while it requires financial support, it does little to enable fathers to see their children regularly. Among fathers with child support orders who participated in the second round of in-depth interviews, more than 40 percent indicated that they had minimal to no contact with one or more children for whom they owed support, and most fathers saw this as unfair. From the fathers' perspective, payment into the child support system should go hand-in-hand with access and visitation.

Fathers' limited access to all their children was primarily attributed to maternal gatekeeping—mothers' behaviors that limit fathers' access to their children. When unmarried parents go their separate ways and the custodial parent asks the court to establish a child support order, the court does not automatically establish a legally enforceable custody, visitation, or parenting time order at the same time. Fathers must secure the resources necessary to petition the court (usually one that is distinct from the child support court), and most lack the financial means to do so. As a result, fathers who were not previously married often have no means of enforcing access to their children, yet are required to financially support them.

"A lot of times they [these fathers] are classified in society as dead beat dads. But there's a difference in being dead broke and being a dead beat."

—Willie, workshop facilitator, FFP

### Involvement of local child support agencies with RF programs ranged from limited to extensive

Although most fathers at baseline reported that they enrolled in programs primarily to improve relationships with their children, fathers in focus groups often said they also hoped to get help resolving child support issues. In PACT, all four RF programs established relationships with their local child support offices in order to better assist fathers in navigating the child support system. The extent and type of help these partnerships facilitated varied across programs, depending in part on local and state laws (Table VI.2).<sup>7</sup>

**Most programs sought to increase fathers' child support knowledge and ability to navigate the child support system.** Three programs sought to increase fathers' understanding of child support policies and processes by having child support staff present information sessions, often in a workshop or program orientation. One

**Table VI.2. Role of child support in RF program services**

	Integrated Cohort Programs			Open-Entry Workshop Programs		
	FFP	SS	Kansas Dept. for Children and Families	CFF	TFP	Ramsey County Division of Child Support
	Missouri State Dept. of Social Services	Missouri State Dept. of Social Services		Hennepin County Division of Child Support	Hennepin County Division of Child Support	
Provide an orientation about the child support system	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Facilitate individual meetings with fathers	✓		✓		✓	✓
Allow RF program to advocate for fathers in child support matters	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Participate in RF program case review meetings					✓	✓
Assign dedicated child support case managers to participants					✓	✓
Co-locate child support staff with RF program			✓ <sup>a</sup>		✓	✓
Reduce state-owed arrears based on RF program participation			✓			✓
Review and modify child support orders as appropriate; reinstate drivers' licenses as appropriate <sup>b</sup>	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

Source: Site visits and program documents

<sup>a</sup> SS held workshops and information sessions at the office of the Kansas Department for Children and Families.

<sup>b</sup> Services were available to any father in the state or county, not only RF program participants; however, advocacy by program staff and co-location of child support staff were intended to facilitate the resolution of such matters.

"...I can devote additional attention to them and make sure that things are being done when they should be done, and I get to know the guys on a face to face basis too because they have to meet with me on a regular basis."

—Mary, co-located child support staff, TFP

program provided participants with a booklet on understanding their child support rights and responsibilities and information on developing a parenting time agreement.

**Some programs worked to improve fathers' access to child support staff by co-locating those staff at RF program offices.** Two programs co-located child support and RF program staff. For one program, the local child support agencies assigned dedicated case managers to fathers participating in the program, and co-located these workers at the RF program's two offices. These co-located child support staff managed the cases of program fathers, allowing fathers to more conveniently access them. Co-location also enhanced child support staff's understanding of each father's unique circumstances and progress. Co-located staff participated in regular RF case review meetings with program staff, which may have put them in a better position to manage such issues as reviews of child support orders, requests for modifications, and reinstatement of driver's licenses suspended due to nonpayment.

**Child support agencies associated with some programs agreed to reduce state-owed child support arrears for RF program participation or completion.** Two programs offered financial incentives for program participation related to state-owed child support arrears. Through an agreement developed with its partner child support agency, one program offered fathers the opportunity to earn up to a total of \$1,625 in arrears reduction for completing the RF program. Fathers in another program could receive reductions in state-owed child support arrears for participation, completion, and for making consistent child support payments. These fathers could have up to 85 percent of their state-owed child support arrears forgiven for completing the parenting workshop and making child support payments in at least 6 of the 12 months following completion of the parenting workshop, with dollar-for-dollar reductions in arrears thereafter, until the balance reached zero.

**Local child support agencies were sometimes open to advocacy by RF program staff.** Some local child support agencies viewed program participation as part of a father's good-faith effort to strengthen their ability to provide financial support for their children. These child support offices were amenable to advocacy efforts by RF program staff to reinstate program participants' driver's licenses, modify child support orders, and keep fathers out of jail for noncompliance, when appropriate.

**Fathers appreciated help from RF programs with their child support issues, but had hoped for more**

Fathers said they appreciated learning basic information about child support, such as how their child support order amount was calculated, their rights to challenge an order, and their responsibility to pay even if they did not have access to their children. Some felt that this led to improvements in their situation. However, most fathers expressed a need for individual-level or legal assistance for issues related to child support and access to children. Two RF programs offered limited legal services

"[...] if I don't have it, I don't have it, but next month they might double up on me or whatever, but if I just keep in communication there, they're going to keep me out of jail."

—Focus group participant

"I need custody, and this program does not help people get that. It needs to go the extra step."

—Focus group participant

to assist fathers with child support, custody, and visitation and paternity concerns.<sup>8</sup> However, not all fathers who needed them were able to receive those services, and some needed more assistance than was available. Fathers also expressed a desire for help resolving what they perceived to be an unfair disconnect between paying child support and access to their children. Fathers felt they deserved access to their children if they were paying child support, and hoped the programs could assist with parenting time, visitation and custody issues.

## VII. LOOKING ACROSS CONTENT AREAS AND PROGRAMS



Responsible Fatherhood programs such as those studied in PACT strive to improve the human condition of fathers and their families. This report describes the views and characteristics of fathers who voluntarily enrolled in four programs, the programs and services offered to address their needs, and the reactions of fathers to these services, including their participation. Future reports will focus on the effectiveness of these programs in creating positive outcomes for fathers. In this chapter, we look across the programs and their content areas to address the three research questions described in Chapter I. We conclude with some implications for program design.

### ***Fathers' circumstances, experiences, and needs: Fathers faced multiple adversities and challenges in striving to be better parents and providers***

The fathers that volunteered for the RF programs in PACT were mostly unmarried low-income African American men in their mid-thirties who did not live with all of their children. These fathers described their primary motivation for enrolling as a desire to become more engaged and better parents. To give their children a better life than they had, these fathers wanted to learn effective parenting skills and become more involved with them. Fathers faced multiple challenges to these goals, including lack of positive father role models; effects of past traumas and ongoing stress; job, financial, and housing instability; and conflicted co-parenting relationships.

Fathers' lives were characterized by adversity, from childhood to adulthood. They described the absence of their own fathers growing up, exposure to traumatic events as

children, and persistent economic and social disadvantage. As adults, they struggled to support themselves and their children, often could not secure stable housing, and many experienced loss, discrimination, and difficulty accessing their children. Many fathers were at moderate to high risk for depression relative to the general population.

Economic instability resulted in large part from fathers' low levels of education, criminal histories, and small social networks. Fathers described a variety of strategies to generate income, but lack of consistent work undermined their ability to provide for their children financially in addition to supporting themselves. Incarceration histories and spells of unemployment meant many were often in child support arrears and had other large debts. Fathers were frustrated by difficulty adjusting child support orders to be reflective of their actual income and frequently worried about consequences for noncompliance.

Upon enrollment, the vast majority of fathers were no longer romantically involved with a woman with whom they shared a child, and contentious break-ups often led to conflicted co-parenting relationships. The result was often that a father's access to his children was controlled by the mother; nonresidential fathers rarely had a visitation or parenting-time agreement. Because about half of the fathers had children by multiple mothers, a father could have a mix of co-parenting relationships, with some cooperative and others conflicted or disengaged. As a result, fathers often lived with or had regular contact with at least some, but not all of their children. Nevertheless, more than a quarter had no contact with any of their children.

Most fathers voluntarily enrolled in RF programs to learn how to be better fathers and positive role models for their children and meet their financial responsibilities.

Most fathers recognized that some of their challenges were due to their own past behavior, and were either ready to make a change in their lives, or were already on the path to doing so. They voluntarily enrolled in RF programs to learn how to be better fathers and positive role models for their children and meet their financial responsibilities. They wanted to be active, involved parents and wanted to spare their children from “going down the same path” that they had taken as young men.

***Program offerings and fathers' responses: Programs offered content to address multiple needs, much of which resonated strongly with fathers***

The RF programs in PACT offered services in the three areas required by their grants—parenting, economic stability, and healthy marriage—but also included other more foundational content. Programs recognized that many fathers had difficult life circumstances and experiences that could have interrupted their healthy development; they reasoned that fathers would need to build some foundational skills and receive support to help them fulfill their roles as fathers, partners, and providers. To this end, all programs provided developmental content, role models, and peer support. Content focused on helping fathers establish skills, habits, and attitudes that would support



their development: exploring what it means to be a man, the importance of being accountable for one's actions, managing stress, and setting goals for oneself. Across programs, fathers participated in 8 hours of this content on average (Table VII.1).

Fathers expressed appreciation for personal development content: program features that gave fathers hope, inspiration, and support especially resonated with them. Fathers saw program staff who were themselves fathers with backgrounds similar to those of participants as powerful role models, because they were living proof that a man could overcome the challenges they were facing. Fathers embraced the group-based aspect of program workshops because of the peer support it provided. They described feeling safe and protected in the group setting and how this allowed them to share their experiences and receive feedback from other fathers like themselves.

Fathers described feeling safe and protected in the group setting and how this allowed them to share their experiences and receive feedback from other fathers like themselves.

Programs addressed participants' stated desires to be better fathers by offering parenting workshops that focused on child development, the meaning of fatherhood, and co-parenting skills. Averaged across programs, fathers participated in 9 hours of parenting content (Table VII.1). Fathers felt that the programs helped them to become more engaged, see the value in their role as a father, and learn new ways to interact with their children that went beyond that of a disciplinarian. They appreciated information about how to petition the court for shared custody or visitation, although they had hoped for more individualized legal assistance to help unblock access to their children.

As required by OFA, the RF programs in PACT offered workshops on skills for healthy marriage and relationships. These focused primarily on the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy relationships, roles and expectations, building trust and intimacy, and avoiding domestic violence. Fathers were the least likely to participate in these workshops compared to other workshops, and received an average of 6 hours of this content (Table VII.1). Fathers who did participate in healthy marriage and relationship workshops were able to describe the communication and conflict management skills they had learned and felt that the workshops were helpful in prompting them to reflect on their behavior in past relationships and identify the characteristics of healthy relationships.

The RF programs in PACT offered both group- and individual level activities to promote fathers' economic stability. Group based activities were most often focused on job readiness skills, such as interviewing techniques, resume development, and job searching. Employment case managers worked to help fathers get into job training or certification programs. On average across programs, fathers received about 20 hours of economic stability content. However, one program went far beyond the others in the area of economic stability, with fathers spending each afternoon for weeks in individually-tailored and often self-directed activities such as computer literacy classes or a job practicum designed to give them some real-world job experience. Fathers at this program received an average of 47 hours of content in economic stability services

(Table VII.1). Across programs, fathers were pleased with economic stability services, though many were still struggling to obtain employment, in large part because of incarceration records that often served as a barrier.

Many fathers struggled to pay child support and were often in arrears. The proportion of fathers who paid child support in the month prior to enrollment (43 percent) was similar to the proportion who were employed (51 percent), even though many fathers did not have child support orders. All fathers wanted to provide financially for their children, but job instability often made this difficult. The involvement of local child support agencies with RF programs ranged from limited to extensive, and many fathers had hoped to have greater assistance or access to legal representation for such issues as child support modifications.

**Table VII.1. Average hours of content received**

	Integrated Cohort Programs		Open-Entry Workshop Programs		Total Hours
	FFP	SS	CFF	TFP	
Personal Development	15	9	1	4	8
Parenting/Co-parenting	11	11	6	7	9
Healthy Marriage/Relationships	10	3	5	1	6
Economic Stability	47	12	2	3	20
Other	5	1	1	5	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Sample size</b>	<b>995</b>	<b>388</b>	<b>822</b>	<b>556</b>	<b>2,761</b>

Source: PACTIS/Site MIS Data

Notes: Total hours calculated across all fathers in sample. Hours include content received through either workshops or individual-level contacts. Other includes program orientations, setting rules for participation, and similar content. Total hours may not equal sum of content areas due to rounding.

### **Role of programmatic factors in participation: Participation was linked to features such as structure, intensity and type of content**

We examine the variation in fathers' participation across programs and content areas for two reasons: (1) to understand better the circumstances under which fathers tended to participate more, and (2) to understand which services fathers chose to attend the most.

On average, fathers in PACT programs participated in a total of 45 hours of programming, but this figure obscures wide variation across programs (Table VII.1). The total average hours received by fathers ranged from 15 to 88 hours, depending on the program. Program participation appears to be linked to program structure. Although the weekly attendance open-entry programs saw somewhat more initial engagement by fathers (Table VII.2), the total number of hours fathers received was far

higher in the daily-attendance integrated cohort programs (Table VII.1). Total hours received ranged from 36 to 88 for the integrated cohort programs, compared to 15 to 20 for the open-entry programs. Differences in amount of participation across type of program cannot be explained by the fact that the integrated programs offered more hours in general than the open entry programs, because very few fathers completed all of the hours offered even at the less intense open-entry workshops. Averaged across programs, fathers completed at least half of the offered workshop hours: 41 percent for the parenting workshop; 30 percent for the employment workshop, and 23 percent for the healthy marriage and relationship workshop. Retention was highest at the program that integrated content in all three areas (41 percent). Fathers' workshop participation often ended when they obtained employment, according to program staff, though this was not the only reason for non-completion.

The largest number of hours received across programs was in economic stability, followed by parenting/co-parenting, and then personal development.

The content areas that fathers were most and least likely to participate in also varied and may have implications for the type of outcomes that may be expected. In general, the largest number of hours received across programs was in economic stability, followed by parenting/co-parenting, and then personal development. The smallest number of hours received (excluding "other") was in healthy marriage and relationships. The pattern differs for the open-entry programs, where the largest number of hours received was in parenting, with economic stability ranking third among the four content areas. These results suggest that serious workforce development services are more likely to occur within integrated cohort programs that expect intensive daily attendance. It also suggests that changes in PACT fathers' economic stability may be more likely in integrated cohort vs. open-entry programs.

Engagement across the various content areas was most consistent in the program that fully integrated all services within a single workshop (FFP). The program that integrated all but the healthy marriage and relationships workshop (SS) saw dramatically lower engagement in that content. Different patterns emerged for the two

**Table VII.2. Percentage of fathers who engaged in workshops**

	Integrated Cohort Programs		Open-Entry Workshop Programs	
	FFP	SS	CFF	TFP
Personal Development	63	58	51	58
Parenting/Co-parenting	57	57	59	64
Healthy Marriage/Relationships	59	27	54	30
Economic Stability	65	58	44	26
Any Workshop Engagement	66	59	72	69

Source: PACTIS/Site MIS Data

Note: Data show participation during the first nine months among all fathers randomly assigned to the program group, N=2,761 (by program: FFP=995; SS=338; CFF=822; TFP=556). Sites began PACT intake between 12/9/2012 and 2/13/2013.

open-entry programs: engagement in the healthy marriage and relationships workshop and the economic stability workshop were low relative to other content areas for one program (TFP), while engagement was more consistent across content areas at the other (CFF). If one anticipates that effects are more likely when fathers receive content in all the core areas (which might not necessarily be the case), one would expect them to occur in a fully integrated cohort program.

### **Implications for RF program practitioners**

The findings from PACT's implementation and qualitative studies have several implications for the design, structure, and operations of RF programs.

#### **To increase overall participation, consider offering daily cohort-based services, rather than weekly open-entry services, especially for unemployed fathers.**

- In PACT, overall participation was higher in programs that were structured for daily attendance over a period of weeks, rather than weekly attendance for a couple of hours at a time. According to program staff, the consistent daily schedule also offered fathers the opportunity to practice and receive feedback on self-discipline, punctuality, and other behaviors that are associated with accountability and personal responsibility.
- One of the daily attendance programs simultaneously offered evening workshops for men who were already employed at enrollment or who obtained work during the course of the program. The evening workshop combined parenting, economic stability, and healthy marriage and relationships services.

#### **To engage fathers in workshops, consider employing program graduates and other fathers who have overcome challenges similar to those of participants**

- One of the most promising practices cited by participants and staff alike was employing as staff program graduates and other fathers who had faced and risen above the kind of challenges faced by participants. These role models with lived experience inspired participants and gave them hope that they could transform their lives and attain their goals of being a responsible and involved parent and provider.
- Successfully completing the RF program was an important criterion for being hired as a facilitator, but one program also required that program graduates either have a college degree or be simultaneously pursuing such a degree.

#### **Incorporate a focus on developing fathers' underlying skills, but also consider strategies for addressing fathers' substance abuse and mental health issues.**

- Given the disadvantaged backgrounds of fathers, all PACT programs included content and strategies to increase and support fathers' personal development.

This emphasis was seen as an important foundation for the programs' focus on parenting education, economic stability services, and skills for healthy marriage and relationships.

- The personal histories and experiences that fathers shared with PACT researchers confirm that many were survivors of trauma and have struggled with substance abuse, depression, and other mental health challenges. One program secured non-ACF funding to employ an on-site therapist to help address such issues. At the same program, fathers who fail drug tests during program participation were permitted to continue receiving RF services, but only on the condition that they regularly attend Narcotics Anonymous or Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and/or engage in substance abuse treatment.

**To help fathers build on and apply parenting skills, consider offering assistance to help them secure visitation rights, parenting time agreements, or shared custody.**

- Fathers in PACT embraced the parenting education they received from RF programs, and believed that it improved their relationships with children for whom they had contact. Yet many fathers had other children with whom they had little or no contact. Fathers had hoped for program assistance in unblocking access to these children, through such means as parenting time agreements, visitation orders, or shared custody arrangements.

**To maximize the dosage of healthy marriage services that participants receive, consider service delivery structure, messaging, and curriculum content**

- In PACT, fathers' exposure to all content areas, including healthy marriage and relationships, was more likely when integrated within a single workshop. When programs in PACT offered healthy marriage and relationship content as part of a separate stand-alone workshop, fathers were less likely to attend and received less healthy marriage content compared to fathers in programs that wove this content into a single workshop.
- RF programs may want to revisit whether they are sending the message that healthy marriage services can be applicable to all fathers, including those who are not currently married or in a romantic relationship. They may also want to consider whether the content of their healthy marriage and relationships curriculum is engaging for both fathers currently in relationships and those who are not.
- While only half of the fathers in PACT were currently in romantic relationships, all were co-parents, and fathers were interested in learning about how to work more cooperatively with their child's other parent and unblock access to their children. Programs may want to consider increasing the emphasis on co-parenting, and training staff to help fathers and mothers develop parenting time agreements.

**To ensure strong participation in economic stability services, consider having fathers engage in self-directed tailored activities each day until they obtain employment.**

- In addition to economic stability content provided during workshops, one program arranged for unemployed fathers to engage in ongoing economic stability activities each weekday afternoon until they obtained employment. This structure ensured a strong dose of economic stability content and fully engaged fathers in preparation for work. These activities were tailored to each father's individual needs, such as GED classes, computer training, or an unpaid internship to gain experience.

**Explore opportunities to increase assistance for child support modifications.**

- Fathers in PACT were very appreciative of learning basic information about child support, such as how their child support order amount was calculated, their rights to challenge an order, and their responsibility to pay even if they did not have access to their children. Yet because of their frequently changing economic circumstances, many fathers had child support orders that were based on outdated information.
- Many fathers had hoped for more individual-level or legal assistance to apply for child support order modifications that would more accurately reflect their economic circumstances. Two programs in PACT offered limited legal services to assist fathers but not all fathers who needed them were able to receive those services, and some needed more assistance than was available.





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## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Findings in prior reports were based on partial data because data collection was not yet complete. Analyses of baseline characteristics and program participation previously reported in Zaveri et al. 2015 covered a partial evaluation sample, could only accommodate a short (4-month) window for participation, and did not include focus group findings. Analyses of program participation in this report consider all attendance within nine months of enrollment. Although themes from the first round of qualitative in-depth interviews (n=87) were reported in Holcomb et al. 2015 and findings from the second round of in-depth interviews (n=59) were described in three briefs, findings from the third wave of in-depth interviews (n=24) were not previously reported.
- <sup>2</sup> Gatekeeping is defined as behavior that limits fathers' engagement with their children. In some cases, gatekeeping may be justified or appropriate, for example, in the case of domestic violence or child abuse. Thus, our use of the term is not intended to imply that mothers' gatekeeping is always inappropriate.
- <sup>3</sup> States vary widely in how they treat the rights of unmarried parents. However, in contrast to divorcing parents, unmarried parents do not generally receive a custody, visitation or parenting time order when child support is established. Typically, unmarried parents must initiate a separate process by applying to a different court to get an order granting legal access to the child (Clary et al. 2017; Dion et al. 2015).
- <sup>4</sup> RF programs are prohibited from using OFA grant funds to provide legal representation for fathers. Such services must be funded through other sources.
- <sup>5</sup> The afternoon activities tailored to each father's economic stability needs were counted as part of FFP's economic stability workshop.
- <sup>6</sup> For a more detailed examination of this topic among PACT fathers, see Clary et al. 2017.
- <sup>7</sup> Because three of the four RF programs served fathers in multiple counties, the child support services available to fathers within those programs may have differed.
- <sup>8</sup> One program had an in-house legal clinic (funded by non-OFA sources) that provided free advice and advocacy related to paternity establishment, visitation, and child support order modification, but not legal representation. Another partnered with a community legal services organization to provide legal advice; it also offered free legal representation to a small number of fathers.



