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Low-Income Fathers' Barriers to Participation in Family and Parenting Programs

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Introduction

Child abuse is an urgent problem, with national estimates indicating that over 700,000 children were identified as victims of abuse or neglect in 2009 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). There is considerable evidence that fathers and father surrogates are overrepresented as the perpetrators of child maltreatment (Ewigman, Kivlahan, & Land, 1993; Fujiwara, Barber, Schaechter, & Hemenway, 2009; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005; Stiffman, Schnitzer, Adam, Kruse, & Ewigman, 2002). National child welfare data indicate that fathers were identified as a perpetrator in half of all child maltreatment fatalities in which a parent was responsible (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Without comprehensive services that target the entire family, including fathers, efforts to prevent child abuse are likely to fall short of their intended goals.

Despite the overrepresentation of fathers as perpetrators of child maltreatment, fathers have been largely absent in the child maltreatment services literature, with some researchers using terms such as “invisible,” “ghosts,” or an “afterthought” to describe fathers (Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, & Dominelli, 2008; O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005; Strega, Brown, Callahan, Dominelli, & Walmsley, 2009). This suggests that child welfare practitioners do not consider fathers as central to the work of protecting children (Strega et al., 2009). Child welfare caseworkers acknowledge that bias and lack of training on how to engage fathers may contribute to the exclusion of fathers from services (O'Donnell et al., 2005). Yet little is known about the best practices for engaging fathers in parenting and prevention efforts (Lee, Bellamy, & Guterman, 2009), and there is a gap in our understanding of the barriers to father engagement *from the perspective of fathers*.

This inattention to fathers is not supported by data on father involvement. Representative samples suggest high levels of father involvement, particularly when children are young (Carlson & McLanahan, 2002) and even among nonresidential fathers (Mincy, Garfinkel, & Nepomnyaschy, 2005). In a national study of urban families, 71% of nonresidential fathers had contact with their child in the past month at age 1, and 61% had an overnight visit since the child’s birth (Mincy et al., 2005). Child welfare data show that 78% of children under the age of 14 months had an involved biological father (Vogel, Boller, Faerber, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2003), and most child welfare involved families who include a father figure (Bellamy, 2009).

When taken on the whole, this research suggests that fathers may be more present and involved in the lives of their young children than is

often acknowledged by child welfare and social work practitioners. Further, there is strong evidence that fathers' behaviors play a direct role in the incidence of child maltreatment, particularly of young children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010; 2005). As such, there is a need for efforts to better serve and engage fathers in child maltreatment prevention and intervention, including enhancing father involvement in parenting programs that typically are designed to service mothers. In this study, we used qualitative data obtained from semi-structured focus groups with low-income fathers to examine several factors related to father engagement in parenting programs, including: 1) where and from whom fathers obtain information about parenting; 2) the types of parenting services men are aware of and their attitudes about participating in such services; and 3) fathers' perceived norms about the acceptability and utility of various parenting practices.

In general, few parenting programs are designed for fathers. In a meta-analysis of 128 primarily evidence-based parenting programs, only 5 studies explicitly focused on or targeted fathers (Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008). Fathers also seem less likely than mothers to participate actively in parenting programs. Only 17% of fathers participated in at least one parent education program, and fewer than 10% participated in father-only events (as opposed to events that involved mothers and fathers) offered through Early Head Start (Raikes, Summers, & Roggman, 2005). The low levels of father involvement and engagement in parenting services may explain why parent training does not seem to benefit fathers as much as it benefits mothers (Lundahl, Tollefson, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2008).

In a recent publication cataloging a wide range of programs for low-income fathers (a publication which included parenting programs), it is notable how few of the father-focused programs have been rigorously evaluated for effectiveness (Avellar et al., 2011). Several programs that have been evaluated occurred in the context of the Head Start fatherhood initiative. An evaluation of one parenting programs for Head Start fathers suggested that the program had a positive effect on father involvement with their young children (Fagan & Iglesias, 1999), while another study of Head Start fathers did not document any positive effects of intervention efforts on behavioral measures of father involvement (Duggan et al., 2004). In a study of low-income urban fathers who participated in an education program to promote healthy couple relationships, father involvement with his child was enhanced following participation in the program, even though the focus of the intervention was on the parental relationship and not parenting per se (Rienks, Wadsworth, Markman,

Einhorn, & Etter, 2011). This may suggest that positive changes in fathering can result from fathers' participation in intervention more broadly, even when the intervention is focused on the quality of the mother-father relationship (McBride et al., 2005).

Other evidence for the potential positive effects of participating in parenting programs can be seen in studies of parenting programs of incarcerated fathers. One study showed positive changes in fathers' knowledge and attitudes about fatherhood following program participation (Robbers, 2005). Another study showed positive changes in fathers' attitudes about parenting, such as respect and appreciation for the child, as well as decreases in parenting stress following intervention (Landreth & Lobaugh, 1998).

Focusing on quantifying fathers' outcomes in terms of changes in father involvement with their children may inadvertently overlook potential positive changes in fathers' experiences as parents (Roy & Kwon, 2007). A study of responsible fatherhood programs for urban fathers found that participants benefited from social support and that such social support provided respite from the isolation of living in dangerous neighborhoods (Roy & Dyson, 2010). The programs provided alternative notions of masculinity; for example, the programs challenged the idea that the most important role of fathers is as a provider of financial support and countered stereotypes about deadbeat dads (Roy & Dyson, 2010).

The Current Study

Though few in number, studies showing that parenting programs can positively influence fathers' attitudes and behaviors are promising (Avellar et al., 2011). Further, fathers do not seem to be interested in traditional parenting programs (Lundahl et al., 2008; Raikes et al., 2005), and little research has been conducted to examine fathers' barriers to participation in parent training. In the current study, we obtained information *directly from fathers* to address questions about potential barriers to fathers' engagement in parenting programs. We focused on factors that have not been widely examined in prior literature, such as fathers' perceptions of whether such programs address the unique needs of fathers. Data were obtained from semi-structured focus groups with low-income urban men to examine three primary questions: 1) where and from whom do men obtain information about parenting?; 2) what types of parenting programs are men aware of in their community, and what are their attitudes about participating in parenting programs?; and 3) what are fathers' perceived norms about the acceptability and utility of various parenting practices,

such as those that are commonly addressed in parent training programs, including time-out and physical discipline of children (including spanking)?

We examined the first two questions in order to establish whether there are certain individuals in the community, such as clergy or pediatricians, whom fathers may feel are particularly reliable sources of parenting information. Fathers' attitudes about parenting programs and their ideas about the types of parenting programs they would find most desirable may help researchers and practitioners understand fathers' barriers to engagement in existing parenting programs and provide information regarding how to frame such services in the future so that they are more desirable to fathers.

We also examined fathers' perceived norms about the acceptability and utility of various parenting practices that are commonly addressed in parent training programs, including disciplinary practices such as time-out and spanking. Father's perceptions of and use of various disciplinary practices have not been widely researched. Fathers' attitudes regarding discipline of young children are important to consider because many parenting programs explicitly teach parents about effective ways to discipline children. In some programs, this may involve addressing the use of spanking or physical discipline (e.g., Chaffin et al., 2004). Studies have shown that spanking is more common among parents who believe that such practices are culturally sanctioned in the community (Taylor, Hamvas, & Paris, 2011; Taylor, Hamvas, Rice, Newman, & DeJong, 2011). Thus, we sought to examine fathers' perceived norms about the acceptability and utility of various parenting practices, particularly in regard to methods of disciplining children.

Method

Participants

This study used a convenience sampling approach to recruit urban fathers older than 18 years of age from a large social service agency in Detroit, Michigan. This agency provides a variety of programs targeting men, including a fatherhood initiative administered through Head Start and a prisoner re-entry program. Each of the three focus groups was comprised of up to 8 male participants, for a total of 17 participants. Given that the study was exploratory in nature, and in order to reduce perceived barriers to participant engagement, no demographic data were obtained from participants during the first two sessions. However, we did collect demographic data for the third session. Men in the third session were 31 to 48 years old. Half were single, 37% indicated that they were in a cohabitation or long-term relationship, and 12.5% were married. The

majority (63%) were unemployed. Most had a high school degree or GED (62.5%), followed by some college (25%) or a college degree (13%). All men were African American, and 75% reported having children in the home. Half of the men were caring for a biological child, while 25% were caretakers of non-biologically related children.

Study Procedures

Each focus group session took approximately one hour. The lead researcher (S. J. Lee) introduced the participants to the goals of the focus group discussion, provided assurances regarding respondent confidentiality, and informed men of their rights as research participants. Male Wayne State University graduate students facilitated the focus groups, and most of these student facilitators were African American. Participants were provided with a $20 gift card for their time spent participating in the study. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim so that the lead researcher could review the transcripts following the groups. The Institutional Review Board at Wayne State University reviewed and approved all study procedures and materials.

The semi-structured focus groups were organized around three themes: 1) where and from whom fathers obtained information about parenting; 2) the types of parenting services men were aware of and their attitudes about participating in such services; and 3) fathers' perceived norms about the acceptability and utility of various parenting practices. Questions for the first theme included: "People obtain parenting information from a variety of sources, including parents, friends, aunts and uncles, siblings, or professionals such as clergy, teachers, and doctors. Where do men in your community (neighborhood) get information or advice about parenting and how to take care of children?" Questions for the second theme included: "Are you aware of any parenting programs in your community that are specifically for fathers? What about other parenting programs that may not be specifically for fathers but you or other fathers might consider participating in them anyway?" Questions for the third theme were: "Fathers discipline their children in different ways. For example, some fathers may spank their children, while some use time-out; other fathers may use all of these strategies, while other fathers may not use much discipline at all. What are common disciplinary practices that fathers in your community use?" Follow-up questions to this theme were: "Do you think it is important for fathers to be involved in child discipline? Why or why not?" and "In your opinion, what are effective ways for a father to discipline a child?"

Data Analysis Approach

Data analysis was conducted by content analysis of the participants' discussion. Transcripts were content coded according to the three themes, noted above, as derived from the key questions asked by the facilitators during the group sessions. After reading the transcript once for content, the second author read the transcript again and highlighted reoccurring themes. Following this iterative approach, themes were organized in an outline format and excerpts drawn to illustrate key points.

Results

Perhaps not surprisingly, focus group participants echoed sentiments often heard in the popular press regarding the lack of father involvement in urban communities and the need for fathers to be present in child rearing. These notions of "deadbeat dads" and absent fathers seemed fairly well entrenched in participants' explanations of problems in their community. Participants pointed to the challenges of "looking after" another man's child; for example, one participant said, "…I took on the responsibility there of another man's kids. He don't take care of them. He don't come see them. He ain't raising them." Participants voiced concerns regarding the ramifications for children of lack of father involvement. Participants indicated that it is especially problematic for boys to grow up without a father, indicating that without a father to guide the way, boys will not learn how to properly treat women. It was suggested that the lack of father involvement contributes to children's general lack of discipline and respect in the community.

Theme 1: Sources of Parenting Information

One of the goals of this study was to understand where and from whom men obtain parenting information, and participants were asked to discuss common sources of parenting information. More than doctors, clergy, or other professionals, participants mentioned other men and fathers in the community as primary sources of parenting information. Related to this notion of the importance of fathers was the idea that older fathers in the community or one's own father served as a mentor or role model for younger male parents. Participants also suggested that one important way fathers learn about parenting is by experience and through the example of others in the community; this may be especially useful because each child is different and thus may require a different parenting approach. Other focus group participants suggested that the church,

other family members besides their father, or people in the neighborhood are additional sources of information.

Theme 2: Parenting Services in the Community

Participants were asked about their awareness of parenting programs in the community and whether such programs were considered useful for fathers in particular. This led to discussion regarding the role of traditional community-based institutions that support parenting, such as the church and school-based mentoring programs. There was a general consensus that there is a great need for more programs for fathers. Men felt that involvement in community parenting programs would be enhanced if those programs were conducted in places where children and fathers could engage in activities together, such as community centers or schools. One individual indicated that it was the responsibility of the community to get fathers involved in different programs: "It's to the point that, right now, as men, we need to get some flyers, go door to door. Say we got the rec. center. Come on down and have a meeting." Men suggested that there are not enough programs designed to help men become involved in child rearing. One individual suggested: ". . . mentoring covers everything. It covers parenting. Teaching about life." Enthusiastic support for community-based parenting programs can be viewed in contrast to traditional parenting classes, which were felt to offer little support or help for fathers. One individual stated, "Parenting class . . . it has a negative impact on the parents because it's introduced from Child Protective Services."

Theme 3: Perceived Norms about the Acceptability of Parenting Practices

Regarding community norms of parental discipline, participants suggested that there was a general lack of discipline in the community. Participants indicated that neighbors do not typically intervene with neighborhood kids or talk to them about their misbehavior out of fear of retribution. Contributing to this was a sense of lack of collective efficacy, because community members may not know each other well and therefore hesitate to intervene when observing misbehavior in the community. In general, it was felt that there was not much discipline of children in the community. The men in this group stated that because fathers are not as involved or are not "stepping up" to their responsibilities, the children are not being taught respect and discipline. One individual stated: "The role of the father is absent. . . . Discipline is something to correct and properly guide

behavior. There's a lack of it." Another man agreed, stating that there was "no role being played by the fathers in my community."

Focus group participants noted that parents should be able to discipline children as they deem appropriate, including using physical discipline and spanking. Some of the men suggested that spanking could be beneficial; however, parents are aware of and fear the potential ramifications of using spanking, specifically indicating fear of involvement from Child Protective Services. Comments underscored the transactional nature of the parent-child relationship, and participants noted that difficult children may warrant more serious parental intervention. For example, one of the men stated, "some discipline, some work, you gotta put that belt on them . . . others you just say stop that."

Additionally, men discussed positive parenting techniques, such as time-out and taking privileges away. For example, one participant stated, ". . . it ain't all physical with children, you gotta have a balance as they say." Alternatives to included teaching the child about problem-solving, leading by example, and taking of privileges. Communication was considered an effective parenting technique and useful when administering discipline to ensure that the child understands why he or she is being punished. For example, one participant said: ". . . they [children] understand that if I have a certain tone, it's alright. Let me back away and regroup and figure out what he really trying to tell me to do." Participants suggested that spanking would be ineffective if the parent does not communicate to the child why he or she is being punished or if the parent spanked the child while mad or using substances. Participants felt that any type of physical, verbal, or mental abuse, including making a child feel poorly about him- or herself or berating the child publically so that the child feels humiliated, would likely be ineffective methods of discipline.

An important theme that emerged was the need for fathers to communicate with and express their emotions to their children, especially their sons. For example, men discussed the idea that fathers and sons are viewed in their communities as weak if they demonstrate emotion. To illustrate this point, one of the men stated that there was a need for fathers to hug their sons and express love.

Discussion

This study explores parenting themes that were generated by fathers in order to gain a better understanding of how men perceive their role as parents and to obtain information regarding the types of services and programs that fathers are likely to view favorably. A goal of such

information is to enhance the design and implementation of intervention programs for fathers. Qualitative research, such as informal focus groups, provides a more contextualized understanding of fathers' views on parenting and parental discipline (Roy & Dyson, 2010). The contribution of this study is enhanced by the relative lack of information obtained directly from low-income, urban fathers regarding their perceptions of parenting.

Fathers' Sources of Parenting Information

Important future directions for research can be drawn from the themes that emerged from the focus group discussions. An original goal of this study was to better understand the barriers men face in participating in parenting programs. Men discussed the various places where they could find programs or information on parenting, for example, through churches and schools. Further, there was general consensus that there are simply too few programs for men or fathers in the community, a finding that is similar to another study of urban men (Roy & Dyson, 2010). The need for more programs for fathers is an important policy priority.

One of the important findings from these discussions was that men were not interested in traditional parenting classes. They had doubts regarding whether parenting programs would be helpful or useful to them and indicated that such programs held the stigma of being associated with Child Protective Services. As an alternative, participants indicated that they would be more interested in mentorship-based programs or programs that are community- and activity-based. It was also clear that the most commonly used resource for parenting information was other men and fathers in the community. This suggests that parenting programs that are developed via peer mentorship may be an effective strategy to engage fathers in services, particularly if fathers view these other men as a non-stigmatizing resource for information about parenting.

While not directly addressed in these discussions, some researchers have begun to explore technology-based alternatives to traditional group-based or one-on-one parenting intervention. When we asked the men in our focus groups about their use of technology, nearly all of the participants—particularly the younger individuals—indicated that they very frequency used text messaging and smartphones to communicate. Technology-based approaches have been used to disseminate parenting information to hard-to-reach populations. Advances in using computer (Ondersma, Grekin, & Svikis, 2011; Ondersma, Svikis, & Schuster, 2007; Ondersma, Winhusen, & Lewis, 2010), Web-based (Feil et al., 2008; Thraen, Frasier, Cochella, Yaffe, &

Goede, 2008), and cell phone (Bigelow, Carta, & Burke Lefever, 2008) technology with mothers show promise with at-risk populations. Technology-based approaches are well liked by participants (Bigelow et al., 2008; Ondersma, Chase, Svikis, & Schuster, 2005) and have increased positive maternal parenting behaviors (Baggett et al., 2010) and reduced maternal parenting risk factors (Ondersma et al., 2011; Ondersma et al., 2007). For example, recognizing the enormous potential impact offered by technology-delivered intervention approaches, the National Healthy Mothers, Healthy Babies initiative *text4baby* uses text messaging to communicate with new mothers regarding their child' s development throughout pregnancy and their baby's first year (www.text4baby.com). However, no similar programs target fathers. Expanding efforts such as *text4baby* to fathers and generally increasing the use of technology to reach fathers is an area ripe for future research and intervention.

Parental Discipline

Many of the fathers demonstrated an awareness of positive parenting techniques, such as time-out or explaining to children that what they did was wrong. This suggests that men are aware of and make use of the types of behaviors that are often presented as alternatives to spanking (Lee, Kim, Taylor, & Perron, 2011). However, the majority of the fathers in the groups discussed spanking as useful and important. Indeed, like many Americans (Taylor, Hamvas, & Paris, 2011; Taylor, Hamvas, Rice et al., 2011), they felt it is the parent's prerogative to spank. It is notable that nowhere in the discussion was there specific reference to the potential negative consequences of using physical disciplinary practices, such as spanking, against children.

There are several implications that can be drawn from the discussion on spanking. Men's beliefs about the utility and effectiveness of spanking are belied by research indicating that it can be harmful to children (Gershoff, 2002; Taylor, Manganello, Lee, & Rice, 2010), suggesting that there is still a widespread need for parent education regarding alternatives to spanking children. In particular, there is a need for parent training in the child welfare system that explicitly educates fathers and mothers against using spanking (Chaffin et al., 2004). However, the focus groups emphasize that, in order to avoid alienating parents, such messages must be presented carefully and in a manner that does not run counter to deeply held parental beliefs about the importance of spanking.

Most focus group participants were aware of and used positive discipline techniques and felt that communication with children was very important even when using physical means of punishment. This is consistent with one prior study indicating high levels of fathers' use of behaviors such as time-out and explaining to the child that what he or she did was wrong in response to misbehavior (Lee et al., 2011). As such, practitioners and individuals developing interventions to target fathers would be well served to build on and reinforce fathers' pre-existing knowledge of positive parenting strategies as alternatives to spanking.

Study Limitations

It is important to emphasize that a primary limitation with all focus group data collected using convenience sampling procedures is that the sample is not representative of all urban fathers nor should the sample be characterized as "at-risk" for child maltreatment. However, the goal of this study was not to generalize findings to all urban fathers or to generalize to those at-risk for maltreatment but rather to expand our understanding of a select group of low-income urban fathers' experiences and perceptions of parenting and to use the content from the discussions to generate new hypotheses about how to develop programs to serve fathers so that these hypotheses and ideas can be tested in further research. An additional caution is that the sample size was small. There was inconsistency in collecting the demographic information; although all men were recruited from the same agency, we cannot compare demographic characteristics across the three focus groups. Given the nature of the focus groups, there is likely to be a bias toward men who were interested in talking about fathering.

Conclusion

Historically, child welfare is viewed as a practice that takes place between women (Davies, 2005; Scourfield, 2006). With parenting viewed as a feminine responsibility, child welfare practice focuses primarily on mothers and largely ignores fathers (Walmsley, Brown, Callahan, Dominelli, & Strega, 2011). However, the safety of children could be bolstered by the recognition that men can—and often do—take on meaningful roles in the lives of children. Child welfare services that target families need to acknowledge that fathers play significant roles in the lives of their children and should seek out new ways to involve fathers in services (Walmsley et al., 2011). Not surprisingly, the men in this study expressed negative views of Child Protective Services. Child welfare training efforts may need to increase recognition of the role of fathers and provide policy and

practice guidelines that include specific strategies for engaging fathers (Walmsley et al., 2011). There may also be opportunities to increase father engagement in services by focusing on mentorship-based activities or by including content that is specific to the fathering role (e.g., how to better communicate with sons). There are opportunities to build on fathers' strengths by developing interventions that capitalize on the fact that almost all fathers are aware of and use at least some positive parenting strategies (Lee et al., 2011). Involving fathers at every stage of intervention and engaging in more collaborative work with fathers could positively influence working relationships and promote better outcomes for children.

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