

# SUPPORTING HEALTHY FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS

## Learnings from a Father-Focused Family Support Program

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### ABSTRACT

**ORGANIZATION:** Fathers' Support Center (FSC) in Saint Louis, Missouri empowers the uninvolved, non-custodial father to become a responsible, involved and financially supportive parent, improving the lives of children and families.

**EVALUATION:** FSC and its evaluation partners are in year 4 of evaluating the impact of FSC's New Pathways to Responsible Fatherhood Family Formation (NPF) Program compared to the Economic Stability (ES) program, utilizing a RCT and mixed methods approach to answer the evaluation questions.

#### Family Formation Program

- 6 weeks; 240 hours
- Responsible parenting
- Healthy relationships
- Economic stability
- Case management
- Legal services

#### Economic Stability Program

- 4 weeks; 80 hours
- Economic Stability
- Limited Legal services

**FINDINGS:** Fathers were overall very satisfied with the programs. Top reasons for not graduating were employment related.

### EVALUATION DESIGN & METHODS

**DESIGN:** The impact evaluation utilizes a randomized controlled trail (RCT) design to measure the outcomes of fathers in the NPF program compared to those receiving ES services only.

**A mixed methods approach** (quantitative and qualitative) was implemented to answer the following **evaluation questions:**



How many families were **reached by each condition** and was there **variability in retention rates** of fathers across conditions?



Did fathers in the treatment and comparison conditions find the **intervention to be acceptable and appropriate?**



What **benefits and barriers** exist to **successful implementation** of father-focused family support programs?

#### DATA SOURCES:

##### Quantitative

**FSC Attendance Data** Participant program attendance and graduation dataset  
 July 2016 - Oct 2018

##### Qualitative

**Participant Focus Groups** 12 focus groups with 59 program participants  
 Jan 2017 - Oct 2018

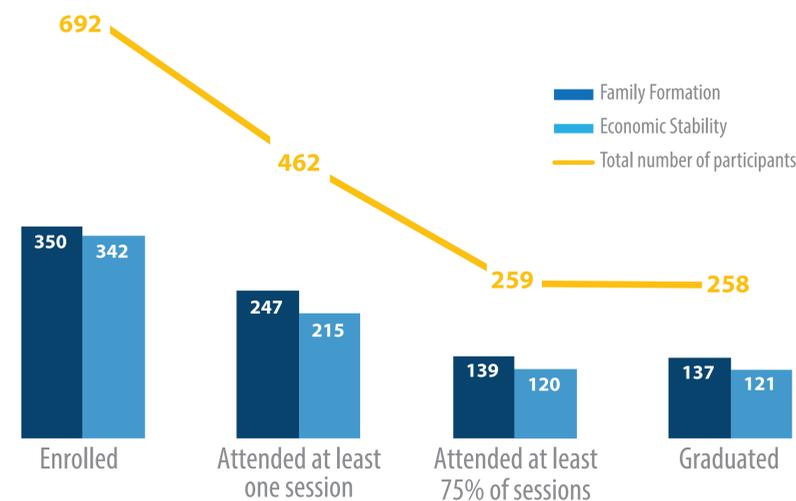
**Staff Focus Groups** 3 focus groups with 37 program staff  
 Dec 2016 - Feb 2019

**Program Participation Barriers Survey** 181 fathers surveyed at the 3-month follow-up  
 Jan 2017 - Dec 2018



### PROGRAM REACH & RETENTION

**ATTENDANCE & GRADUATION:** Of the 692 fathers who enrolled, 39% graduated from the NPF program (137/350) and 35% graduated from the ES program (121/342). Differences in graduation rates by program were not significant,  $\chi^2(1) = 1.52, p = .22$ .



**PROGRAM PARTICIPATION BARRIERS SURVEY:** Fathers reported top reasons for why they did not graduate from the program. (181 fathers)

**27%** Existing job schedule conflicted **17%** Other responses\* **13%** Started a new job

\*Examples of other responses include: probation, family matters, mental health



### ACCEPTABILITY & APPROPRIATENESS OF PROGRAM

**PARTICIPANT FOCUS GROUPS:** Fathers found each program to be acceptable and appropriate. They gained improved self-confidence, a positive change in their relationships, an increase in motivation and improved communication at home and work. Fathers had very few dislikes or suggestions for improving the program. The following are examples of themes that emerged:

**The NPF and ES program met or exceeded fathers' expectations. They found each curriculum to be helpful and relevant to their lives and families. (28 fathers)**

"I came to the program in hopes of getting child support modification, visitation for my son... I didn't realize all the other subjects that they help you with. It's teaching you how to be a better man, a better father. From nutrition to finances and even open house with therapy. I'm definitely very happy that I've decided to come here." -NPF Program Graduate

"Yeah, I joined first to look for a job...but coming here, every day for the last three weeks with all these guys, they taught me a lot, they showed me a lot. I feel I grew since the first day I walked in and until now. So I feel this is probably the best thing I've done so far." -ES Program Graduate

**One of the best parts of the program was their time spent learning and sharing with other fathers. Fathers appreciated the brotherhood that was formed. (19 fathers)**

"I would have to say it was my group. It went from 10 complete strangers to family. These guys are my brothers, and I love them to death. If they call me and they need me, if I'm able, I'm there. And we'll continue to keep in contact with each other... It's just like one big family here." -NPF Program Graduate

"The best part for me is talking to guys. I never really had a man figure in my life. You know, I'm 32 years old, my dad was never in my life. So to have a guy that I can talk to about my situation, they going to listen. They don't judge me. I like that." -ES Program Graduate



### BENEFITS & BARRIERS TO PROGRAM

**STAFF FOCUS GROUPS:** Staff shared benefits and barriers to successful implementation of the programs. The following are examples of themes that emerged:

**The program staff's interdisciplinary approach helps address barriers that prevent a healthy parent/child relationship. (4 staff)**

"We call it the circle of support. The guys have their facilitators, social worker job developer, the family therapist and the legal clinic all working in concert to ensure they get the services that they need." -Program Staff

"If the client is on parole, we have a relationship with probation and parole. We even let their wife or significant other know they can call us or one of the social workers. The individuals finally get an opportunity to know someone cares about them: a lot of people want you to succeed. That's what makes most of the guys successful." -Program Staff

**Some fathers come in under difficult circumstances, which impacts their participation in the program. (1 staff)**

"Our guys have been homeless, and they don't know where they gonna be at from night to night... they're really living out of a backpack. They don't show back up because they think, 'My hygiene is not good enough. I'm wearing the same clothes.'" -Program Staff

### KEY LEARNINGS

**Fathers were overall very satisfied with each program. They want to be involved in their child(ren)'s lives but sometimes face the following challenges:**

- Strained relationship with child(ren)'s mother
- Unemployment
- Lack of knowledge of legal resources

FSC's staff interdisciplinary approach helps to address these barriers that can prevent a healthy parent/child relationship.

**Top reasons fathers reported not graduating from the program were employment related:**

- Job schedule conflicted with program time
- New employment as a result from program participation

While securing employment is a success measure for the program, this can pose a challenge to the evaluation if fathers are unable to graduate from the program. FSC's strategies for addressing graduation rates include:

- Alternative classes for fathers who obtain employment
- Individualized follow-up services and achievement tracking



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