



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Office of Family Assistance

National
Responsible
Fatherhood Clearinghouse



Automation:

Welcome to Dad Talk Podcast. Join us as we bring you cutting edge information, research and professional insights regarding the field of responsible fatherhood, produced by the national responsible fatherhood clearinghouse where our mission is to provide, facilitate and disseminate current research and proven and innovative strategies that will encourage and strengthen fathers and families. Now here's your host Nigel Vann of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse.

Nigel Vann:

Welcome to our first Dad Talk Podcast with the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, otherwise known as fatherhood.gov. I'm Nigel Vann. I'm the product development lead at the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse and today we're going to do our first podcast. We've talked about doing this for quite a long while and we finally decided it to give it a go. So I'm going to be joined today by Dr. Armon Perry, from the School of Social work at the University of Louisville in Louisville, Kentucky. Dr. Perry is also the project director for the For Your Child Fatherhood Program and he's going to talk with us today about that program and specifically the co-parenting work they've been doing there. We really want to explore how fatherhood programs can really dive in a bit deeper to the needs of fathers, particularly nonresidential fathers in terms of how they can best connect to their kids, how they can best develop a good, positive co-parenting relationship with the mothers of their children. So Armon welcome.

Dr. Armon Perry:

Thanks for having me Nigel.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah, it's great to have you here and we've talked a little bit. I think this is the first time we've actually talked where I can see you. I've been very impressed by what I've learned about the work you're doing and the journey you've been on. And so I'd like you to start by if you could just tell us a little bit about how you got involved in this fatherhood work.

Dr. Armon Perry:

Sure. Well again those are kind words so I appreciate you saying that. We're working really, really hard to try to influence and impact families and so to see and hear that it's making a difference and people are taking notice that's an affirmation that gives us fuel to keep going. When I think about how I got started in this work, I am as you mentioned I teach in the School of Social Work here at the University of Louisville, in Louisville, Kentucky. So I'm a social worker by trade. What this means is that I got my start in this work by doing work with kids who the state said didn't have parents willing or able to take care of

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them in the state of Alabama. And so as a foster care social worker. And so when we were doing that work what I found was that it wasn't as true as often as the state said their parents didn't have kids willing or able to take care of them.

Dr. Armon Perry:

We would have to do termination of parental rights petitions. So anytime a kid was in care for 15 out of 22 months the Adoption & Safe Families Act said that we had to file a petition to sever those rights from the parents so that the kids could be free to be adopted. Well, what I learned in doing that work was that our agency wasn't doing a whole lot to reach out to dads and in many cases we didn't even know who dad was. So, when I began to try to do my own recognizant work to figure out who dad was and try to figure out what, if any, role dad would play. Whether or not dad would be a viable replacement option, what I found was that many of the dads did not know that their children were in foster care. I found that in many cases that dads had not been engaged in any services, there was no intake. There was no assessment done with dad. Dad was just on his own.

Dr. Armon Perry:

I found that to be troubling, to say the least and to be quite honest with you, I found myself feeling that I was complicit in a system of oppression rather than an agent of change which I set out to do when I signed up to be a social worker. So, anyway I decided that I could no longer stay at that agency if I planned on continuing to be who I said I was. So I left. I went back to graduate school and my intention then was to position myself to train the next generation of social workers and I figured the best place to do that would be as a professor teaching college students who say that they wanted to be social workers. Well the closest PhD is a researched degree and so when it came time for me to pick a research topic naturally fatherhood was a fit for me. So that's how I got involved in fatherhood work.

Dr. Armon Perry:

I graduated from graduate school in 2008. Moved to Louisville at that time. My thinking then was I could show up here and combine my research skills with agencies and organizations that were already here in town doing work around fathers and families and I would be able to help them bridge the gap between policy, research and practice. What I found was that there weren't as many agencies interested in working with dads as I would have liked. So long story short, when the opportunity came up in 2015 for us to write a proposal to produce our own intervention we knew better than to rely on to count on anyone else. We just decided to put our boots on the ground, so to speak, and start doing the work. So, we've been at it since 2015 enrolling dads into a program that features 28 hours of parent education and up to six months of case management services to simply help them increase their capacity of taking more active roles in their children's lives. As you mentioned we call it For Your Child.

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Nigel Vann:

Great and so it sounds like that's been a pretty successful program. I know one of the barriers you ran into with the guys was to do with the co-parenting side of things, right? Can you say a little bit about maybe where you've had successes and how that led you to deciding to do this co-parenting component?

Dr. Armon Perry:

Yeah. So absolutely. So, one of the things that we get a lot from our dads is the guys will tell us for many of them that come into our program this is one of the first times that they've had an opportunity to engage other men in discussions around parenting. Our guys tell us quite often that it's not uncommon for them to converse with other men and with other fathers, but typically when they're doing that it's not around issues related to parenting, right? One of the things that I've been pleasantly surprised by is that it's not all that uncommon for us to leave our workshops and see a group of guys hanging around in the parking lot recapping the workshop as if it were a Monday morning quarterback situation. So I've been really, really pleased to see that as often as we have.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah that's really cool because you so often hear that dads won't go to a fatherhood program.

Dr. Armon Perry:

Right, yeah. We've not found that to be the case at all. Again our program was new when we started, so it took us awhile to get some traction. It took us awhile for the community to embrace who we were and figure out what we were doing. But, since that has happened our program has really, really taken off and become a fixture in the communities that we serve dads and I could not be prouder of our team for continuing to move that work forward. But, to your larger point though one of the things that our dads have also told us is that they enjoy the program, they enjoy the discussions, the conversations. They feel as though they've grown as men and as fathers. They've increased their capacity to take more active roles in their children's lives. However, when it comes time for them to act on their intentions to be more involved, one of the barriers that many of them face is that they necessarily have to negotiate access to their children with the custodial parent, more often than not that's mom.

Dr. Armon Perry:

If mom has not been a part of any intervention then it makes it difficult for dad to be able to negotiate that increased access so that he can apply whatever it is he's learned in our program. Dads have told us that moms have been skeptical about his motivation. Moms have been reluctant to allow increased access because of whether it be tumultuous or previous relationships or concerns about co-parenting conflict, whether it may be some resentment or even hostility about multiple [inaudible 00:08:37] fertility dad may have. Other children with different partners. Mom may have a new partner who she's

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looking to establish a relationship and a rhythm and a family routine with and dad's increased presence gets in the way of that. It may be that dad has a new partner and mom is concerned about the extent to which the children should or shouldn't, could or couldn't be around the new partner. Any number of situations and scenarios that have thrown a number of challenges and barriers as it relates to dads getting more access to their children so that they can apply whatever it is they learned in our program.

Dr. Armon Perry:

So that's been one of our biggest or probably the biggest hurdle that we had to wrestle with and we're making attempts to overcome. Some of the work that we've been doing for the last maybe year and a half, close to two years has been an attempt to help us get beyond some of those challenges and I'm sure we'll talk a little bit more about that as our time today continues.

Nigel Vann:

Absolutely, yeah. And obviously you know this is an issue that I think every fatherhood program faces. Even if you've got parents who are in the home together, I've heard stories of dad's in the program and he's learning new ways to do things, but then he's going home and mom's saying well that's not the way we do things. He's learned maybe to change a diaper a certain way or feed them this.

Dr. Armon Perry:

Sure.

Nigel Vann:

So you start creating a problem at home if you can't talk to mother right, but it's particularly an issue obviously as you say if they're not in the same home together.

Dr. Armon Perry:

Yeah, absolutely.

Nigel Vann:

Going back to the parent's fair share demonstration in the 90s, they tried to have a mediation component and bringing parents together. But they really got very few people to take them up on that. So I'm just really intrigued and interested in the fact that you've had some success here in bringing mothers to the table. So, could you first of all tell us, I know you've got yourself an extra grant to do this part of the work right?

Dr. Armon Perry:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

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Nigel Vann:

So how did you get that funding and then how did you start engaging the mothers and what did you say to them to get them to come in?

Dr. Armon Perry:

Yeah, yeah those were really interesting conversations. So yes, as you mentioned our fatherhood program is funded by the Office of Family Assistance as a part of its new pathways to fatherhood funded mechanism. So that's where we again enrolled dads of the child For Your Child Fatherhood Program. That funding mechanism doesn't allow us to use resources from the grant to serve mothers, which again has been a bit of an obstacle, barrier for us, because the connection between fatherhood and co-parenting. So this was maybe 2017 I guess it was the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network put out a call for some mini grants, some small grants. I think the budgets were capped at \$50,000 and I just saw it as an opportunity to attempt to be responsive to what the dads were telling us. So we put together a proposal and we were fortunate enough to have it funded to where what we did was we took a trimmed down version of what we teach our dads and we enrolled custodial mothers into a one time workshop where we essentially just taught them some of the same things that we were teaching dads.

Dr. Armon Perry:

The idea there was to expose mothers to the commitments that dads were making in an attempt to try to create or manufacture some additional receptivity to this idea of co-parenting. We were just looking to open up a window of opportunity hoping that dads would be able to step through that and show up and show up at a place and a time where moms were more open and receptive to the idea of working with dad. Dad gets an opportunity to apply what he's learned and maybe create a virtuous cycle so to speak where moms and dads are working together in a cooperative way rather than as happens all too often which is in a competitive way.

Dr. Armon Perry:

So as I mentioned what we did was we looked at our content and the curriculum that we use is the National Fatherhood Initiatives 24/7 Dad. But given that we serve nonresident fathers, we figured we wanted to beef up the co-parenting there. So we added a couple of different modules from a curriculum called Together We Can. It's a co-parenting curriculum that was developed by the extension office at Michigan State University. So that's what our fatherhood program looks like. What we did is we reviewed all of our content there. We said, "What are the most salient pieces that revolve around, or at least have some connection to the idea of co-parenting?" We pulled out some of that content, we pulled out some of the activities. We pulled out some of the role plays and things of that nature and we packaged it together in about a two hour workshop and then we started enrolling custodial mothers into a one time workshop where we presented them with some of that content.

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Dr. Armon Perry:

So the way it would look it would be maybe the third or fourth workshop in our fatherhood program and what we would do is I would go into one of the workshops and ask the dads whether or not they felt good about what they were receiving. Whether or not they were bought into the program and if that was the case, we'll then ask them if they felt like their children's mothers would benefit from receiving some of the same content. As you might imagine, the guys are like, "Yeah, absolutely." So, I would have them share the mother's contact information with me. I would turn that information over to a research assistant. She would reach out to the mothers via telephone or text message asking them if they would be interested in a one time workshop that was around co-parenting.

Dr. Armon Perry:

We had to message or frame it in a particular way in order to get moms to take us up on the offer because initially we would get pushback and blow back from moms from the standpoint that many of them felt like the issues that they were wrestling with were not their issues, but indeed they were deficiencies on the father's part. So for the mother to engage in a co-parenting workshop because they themselves were finding the issues, according to moms, with dad. So we learned early on that what we needed to do was revise our messaging and so what we did was we framed our recruitment picture around the idea that as custodial mothers we wanted to reach out to them because we knew that they had hands on experience and expertise and that as a professor at the university I had an interest in making our fatherhood program as efficient and effective as possible. One of the best ways we could do that was to reach out to moms to get a sense or a feel from them about how it was that dads were actually applying what they had learned.

Dr. Armon Perry:

For any number of reasons, mothers were a lot more amenable to hearing that message than the one where we were asking them to engage in a co-parenting discussion. As a matter of fact, by the end of the FRPN project, believe it or not we actually had mothers saying that they wanted more content. They were curious to know what it was that we were teaching the dads. So we were doing one time workshops that were about two hours, but mothers were actually declaring for more, which again I wouldn't of predicted or been able to come up with in my wildest imagination when we first started and we were struggling to get mothers to enroll. But sure enough after we changed that recruitment pitch, we were able to enroll 153 mothers into the project. We split them up randomly into two groups. Those are often made with the research process. There's the tried and true intervention group and then there was a control group.

Dr. Armon Perry:

So, we had three primary measures. One being co-parenting relationship quality. Two, conflict resolution skills and then three, mothers reports for father's involvement. So we would split the mothers

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up into two groups, send the mothers through the workshops engaging the discussion and conversation related to those curriculum pieces that I mentioned. After the workshop was over we did some focus groups to get some more insight from them about what their thoughts and beliefs were about the quality of the information, gather some information about their co-parenting experiences and also solicit their feedback as it relates to how we might improve the product so that it would be more attractive to mothers and parents in the future.

Dr. Armon Perry:

So, in addition to that much like you mentioned, we also work with a court approved mediator. A guy who was basically on standby ready to do a facilitated session, individual session between moms and dads where they would work out a mutually agreed upon co-parenting plan. What we learned was that much like you said with the Parents Fair Share Project, what we learned was that the use of the term mediation was maybe a little bit too formal for the moms. It scared them off a little bit. They were concerned about the formality of that. They were concerned about the extent to which the co-parenting plans would be legally binding and put them in a situational position where they were going to be held accountable for certain types of things at a point in time where they were encouraged by what they were seeing by dads, but they weren't exactly sure that it was going to stick. Does that make sense?

Nigel Vann:

Absolutely, absolutely yeah. Just to clarify so it was only about half of the 153 who did all this right? What did you do with the other people? Did you do a pre-questionnaire and a post questionnaire with them? The ones that didn't come to the workshops?

Dr. Armon Perry:

Yeah so we took that 153 and they were randomly assigned to the control or an intervention group. 69 of the mothers in the intervention group and then the others were in the controlled group. So for the control group they didn't receive any services at all. We simply mailed them a brochure that was developed by the National Fatherhood Initiative. It had 10 tips on how to be a better co-parent. So we just mailed them the co-parenting brochures and then they completed surveys for us and we used their data to create a comparison group to what it was we were getting from the mothers in the intervention group. We had three data collection ways. There was one before the intervention. There was a second one three months post intervention and then a third one six months after the intervention. What we found was that over time the mothers in the intervention group reported statistically significant improvements in conflict resolution skills and co-parenting relationship quality.

Dr. Armon Perry:

We were trending in the right direction in mothers report of father's involvement, but not to the point of statistical significance. So, we had some good outcomes and I think some promising data that if we

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had an opportunity to scale that project up that we were in real good position to be able to get some even improved outcomes around the areas of co-parenting relationship quality, conflict resolution and possibly even father's involvement.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah so it's very encouraging though, yeah. So is that program stopped any or are you still serving custodial mothers?

Dr. Armon Perry:

Yeah unfortunately that as I mentioned that FRPN project I described as a mini grant right? So again the budget was \$50,000 for the entire project. So we were able to serve, again enroll I'm sorry I should say enroll 153 mothers. By comparison our fatherhood project has a much larger budget and we've enrolled over 1200 dads in it. So again, so a great deal of discrepancy in terms of resources, in terms of staffing, in terms of opportunities to engage. But, so yes to answer your question yes, the co-parenting project has concluded. It ended when our FRPN funding ran out at the tail end of last year. So we've recently concluded data analysis and have wrapped up our final report. It's actually posted to the FRPN website for those who may be interested. You can see it on FRPN.org, I think is the website. So yeah that's there for practitioners or researchers alike to be able to take a look at, if they're interested in potentially replicating our study or addressing some of the limitations or advanced data knowledge then. It's all documented for folks there on the FRPN website.

Nigel Vann:

Great. Yeah I know you're going to be talking a bit more about this on our co-parenting tier one webinar on May the 20th. So at some point those details will be posted to the website. So people will be able to find out more about your work from fatherhood.gov and our website about that webinar.

Dr. Armon Perry:

Yeah one of the things I'm excited about.

Nigel Vann:

I'm sorry go ahead.

Dr. Armon Perry:

No I just said I'm excited about the opportunity so I'm looking forward to it.

Nigel Vann:

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Yeah, great absolutely. Yeah. I just wanted to go back a little bit to the curriculum work that you're doing with the fathers. You said they get 28 hours. The major chunk of that is from 24/7 Dad and then you're using some co-parenting from together-

Dr. Armon Perry:
Together We Can.

Nigel Vann:
Together We Can, I'm sorry yeah. So how many hours of the co-parenting do the dads get?

Dr. Armon Perry:
Yeah, so for those who maybe familiar with 24/7 Dad is that it has 12 modules and it's recommended that each of those modules take about two hours. So we do 24 hours from 24/7 Dad and then the other four hours are from Together We Can. There was an activity called a balloon activity. There's a fictitious couple Felix and Maria that we use from Together We Can. There's my hopes and dreams for my co-parenting relationship activity that we do from Together We Can. But the other information is all from 24/7 Dad.

Nigel Vann:
Okay. So how did you take that 28 hours of work and compress it into two hours to share with the mothers? Did you immediately get to two hours or did you have to try something and then change it again a bit?

Dr. Armon Perry:
Right, so what we ended up doing is before we got started with that project we did focus groups with the mothers to get a sense or a feel from them about how long their attention spans would last, right? What we came up with or what mothers told us was right around two hours was about the max that they were interested in, at least in our focus groups. So, what we did was we started there and then we said, "Okay well if we have two hours what are the most important or salient pieces we want to drive home in that two hour window?" So that's how we made that decision.

Nigel Vann:
Okay, okay.

Dr. Armon Perry:
Most of the content is about ... I'm sorry go ahead.

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Nigel Vann:

Oh, no carry on. Carry on.

Dr. Armon Perry:

I was going to say most of the content revolved around the modules related to not only co-parenting, but communication, conflict resolution. There's a lot on empathy. There's a lot on what 24/7 Dad calls a walk in a mile in her shoes. We supplemented with videos. What we're trying to do is we're trying to get dads a behind the scenes as to what it's like the day in and day out rigors of raising a child. All of our dads are not resident dads. Historically and again I don't need to tell you this, but historically nurturing and caregiving has been largely the domain of moms. So one of the complaints that we hear from moms is that dads don't always understand what it means or what sacrifices they, they being mothers, have to make in terms of putting their schedules on hold, putting their lives on hold so that they can promote their children's healthy growth and development. So given our interest in increasing the amount of empathy between mothers and fathers, we wanted to make sure that we were driving that message home. So the extra content from Together We Can allows us a mechanism and a vehicle in order to do that.

Dr. Armon Perry:

So when we had an opportunity to actually engage mothers and share with them some of the things that we're teaching dads, we wanted to be intensive about making sure that we let mothers know that we were talking to them about things related to conflict resolution an empathy so they could be more likely or more amenable to again engage when dad came back around after having graduated from our program.

Nigel Vann:

So that was one of the significant findings. Well maybe that's the one that maybe wasn't as statistical significant in terms of father's behavior changing right? But understanding where the dads were coming from, that was a significant finding, statistically right?

Dr. Armon Perry:

Right. Both conflict resolution and mother's report of co-parenting relationship quality, yep.

Nigel Vann:

Okay, yeah.

Dr. Armon Perry:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

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Nigel Vann:

So from the father's side, did they know ... Well obviously they knew these mothers were going through the program. They had made the initial referral.

Dr. Armon Perry:

Right.

Nigel Vann:

So then you'd reach out to mom and you got her in there. So did that in any way change the dad's appreciation of what the mother was doing in terms of giving them a bit more empathy for her side of the co-parenting relationship?

Dr. Armon Perry:

Yeah so I think even absent the FRPN project, I think that one of the things that our dads tell us a lot is that after having gone through the program, and again keep in mind it's 28 hours. Seven workshops that are four hours each. One of the things that dads routinely tell us is that after having gone through and graduated, they have a much clearer understanding about what it means to be a full time parent. What the rigors of parenting are. So to speak to that and one of the activities and this is early on that we do is called a balloon activity. So what we do is we have the dads to give them yellow balloons and blue balloons, right? So the yellow balloons are supposed to represent their children. So for each kid you have you get a yellow balloon, you write your kid's name on it. Then for each stressor or obligation you have you get a blue balloon and you write that on it whether it be a mortgage or a job or car payments or student loans, whatever the things that the dads have to take care of.

Dr. Armon Perry:

As you might imagine we have anywhere between 15 to 20 dads in each of our cohorts and sometimes the dads have multiple children and all of them have multiple stressors or obligations. And so, all at once they blow these balloons up and we say go and they throw the balloons up in the air and the object of the activity is for them to balance all of the balloons and keep all of them in the air without allowing any of them to hit the ground. Obviously there's a priority on the yellow balloons because the yellow balloons represent the kids. So, if anything is going to fall and hit the ground it has to be something other than the kids. Again, as you can probably conjure up an image, the room basically turns into a mad house with balloons flying all over the place. This is one of the early activities that we do and inevitably what happens is right as someone's yellow balloon gets lost in the shuffle and mixed with somebody else's blue and yellow balloons, right before it hits the ground one of the dads will reach down and he'll give it a nice little tap and keep it in the air just long enough for that dad to be able to get his balloon. Yeah, absolutely. Just long enough for him to be able to get his [inaudible 00:28:13] by himself and balance out the situation.

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Dr. Armon Perry:

It's usually at that point where the facilitators will stop the activity and say, "Well okay we now have a teachable moment right? So what just happened?" We're able to impress upon the dads the importance of the co-parenting relationship because ideally all of us have at least one other person who's job it is to help us balance all those balloons. More often than not that's the co-parent and for our guys given that they're nonresident dads, what that means is more often than not disproportionately that burden is placed on mom. So when dads are able to see and recognize the difficulty they have in the symbolic activity of keeping balloons in the air, it helps them to really, really understand and have a great appreciation for the rigors that their co-parents are going through in terms of keeping actual people from falling on the ground and slipping through the cracks.

Dr. Armon Perry:

It gives us an opportunity again early on, to impress upon the importance of co-parenting and an appreciation for our co-parents and also gives us an opportunity to come back to that if and when dads get sidetracked or get upset about or emotional about whether it be co-parenting conflict or things that they feel like are unfair to them or they're being marginalized. It gives us an opportunity to come back and say number one, what's the name of the program? The program is for your child. So it gives us a North Star, so to speak, to keep them focused and then we also have the salient early activities that give us an opportunity to chart our course and keep us focused when things don't go our way.

Nigel Vann:

That's beautiful. I love that activity, yeah. So do you also engage them in other people in the co-parenting team? So besides the two co-parents it's also helpful to have other people who are part of your co-parenting team to help keep those balloons in the air, right? So I mean for instance, what about a stepfather? Say there's another man in the house with the custodial mother. Do you talk with guys about how to form a co-parenting relationship with him? How to approach him? I know that's got to be a really hard thing. I'm the nonresident dad and I've been a nonresident dad, so I can empathize with this a little bit myself. Anyway, but if I'm here and my child's spending a chunk of time in the household of the mother and she's got a new guy, be the stepdad or the boyfriend or whatever, I'm going to be feeling a little bit anxious about that or who is this dude? Right? So do you talk with the dads about ways to manage that relationship, to have a conversation with him?

Dr. Armon Perry:

Absolutely. So, there are two things that come to mind. The first is our second activity as a matter of fact is from the Together We Can curriculum and it's called The Family Wheel. If you can picture a worksheet or a sheet of paper that has a large circle in the middle with a handful of smaller circles connected to it on the perimeter of that central large circle. What we do is we have the guys to write their names in the middle circle and write down the names of all of the people that they consider to be family in the

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smaller circles that surround the orbit so to speak, the larger circle. Then we have them share with us why? Who are these people and why do you consider them to be family?

Dr. Armon Perry:

Then we have them flip the paper over and there's the exact same diagram, but this time we have them complete the activity from their child's perspective. So in other words, they write their kid's name in the middle circle then we have them to write down the names of all of the people that their children would consider to be family. And then we go through the same discussion. Why is it that your child considers these people to be family? What role do they play in their lives? What ways do they contribute to their children's healthy growth and development? Then the discussion takes on the idea that as fathers for us to be the types of men and fathers that we want to be, it's important for us to have a respectful relationship with every single person that our child considers to be family.

Dr. Armon Perry:

That doesn't mean we have to be friends with them. It doesn't mean we have to-

Nigel Vann:

Out of your circle, right, as well?

Dr. Armon Perry:

Right, right. And so in some instances there's overlap between who dad considers to be family and who the child would consider to be family. But in some cases they're completely separate and independent. But again it gives us an opportunity to share with dad the importance of having a respectful, or working to develop a respectful relationship with all the people who have an influence and impact on this child's life. Without regard to whether or not he has a romantic relationship with them or regardless to whether or not he has a friendly relationship with them. But he has to have at least a functional and respectful relationship with him, if for no other reason these folks have influence and impact and are contributing to their child's growth and development.

Nigel Vann:

So, how about specifically talking to that other man who might be in the household? How would you ask the guys to have a conversation with him without really being hostile? That could be not the easiest thing to do, right?

Dr. Armon Perry:

Yeah. Yeah when I think about ... Even as I think about my own situation right? I'm a father myself and as you mentioned or alluded to if there were another man doing things that approximated what I do in

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terms of fatherhood with my child I think that would be really, really tough for me to wrap my mind around. So again, these are not easy discussions to have. But one of the ways that we are intentional about trying to engage dads in these conversations is, we use a lot of videos to help drive home points. One of the videos we show, we show a clip from a movie called, "Day Late and a Dollar Short." The movie features Mekhi Phifer and in the movie Mekhi Phifer's character spent some time in jail and prison. He's incarcerated for some period of time.

Dr. Armon Perry:

He comes home and when he comes home his girlfriend has since moved on, has a new relationship. She's actually married to a guy who is a middle class guy. They live in a nice house and a fancy neighborhood and Mekhi Phifer's son is again as you mentioned, he's being raised by his mother and now his stepdad. Mekhi Phifer's character is again fresh out of prison, doesn't have a job, doesn't have stable housing. Is not in a position to provide for his child the way that he would like to. Is not able to fulfill those socially prescribed roles as father and provider the way that many of us would like in the way that our society requires of us. So he has a really, really difficult time coming to grips with the fact that not only is he not as active as he would like to be, but there's another man who is indeed as active as he would like to be.

Dr. Armon Perry:

So, we use clips from that movie to help set the stage for some really, really difficult conversations about how it is that we need to set aside our own feelings about whatever situations we are in or our children are in and focus and concentrate on what's important which is what's best for our child whether or not this other man whomever he may be, whether or not he is a positive influence on our child and if so, how is it that we work with him and our child's mother and whoever else is in that child's orbit in order to promote that child's safety and growth and development. But again, certainly not easy. A lot easier said than done and a lot of our guys wrestle with it and struggle with it. But it's certainly something that we take head on and we have some intentional discussion and conversation about.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah.

Dr. Armon Perry:

We attempt to provide them with some practical resources that facilitate those discussions as well.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah, no I mean that's absolutely essential yeah. It's a learning curve, right? I mean the fact that you have an ongoing program, it's not like you're just throwing the guys out there to try having these

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conversations. But they're able to come back and bounce off some of the experiences. I mean even after the 28 hours is over, can the dads still come back and talk to you and talk to each other?

Dr. Armon Perry:

Yeah, absolutely. So again you talked about the idea that the thing is ongoing, right? So we're doing the work, but we're learning and we're trying to incorporate what we learn into the thing so that we're serving dads in a way that is representative of their thoughts and ideas and beliefs and feelings. But then also having to reconcile that with maintaining the fidelity to the curricular and not making so many changes that the thing no longer approximates what it's supposed to. The thoughts and beliefs of the curriculum developers. So there's a delicate balance we have to strike there.

Dr. Armon Perry:

But in terms of our ongoing engagement with our dads, we've developed an alumni group and if I'm being completely honest with you, if there's one thing that I wish I would have had the foresight to give more thought and attention to at the beginning of our program it would have been to do a better job of resourcing our alumni group. So to whatever extent we're able to keep our program going in the future, that's one of the things that will definitely be focused on in the future, so that again our dads are able to stay connected. One of the biggest benefits they get is they graduate and they now have a community that they're connected to and they have a social capital that they've been able to connect with and benefit from whether it be other dads in the program. Whether it be facilitators, whether it be staff members. Whether it be myself as a project director who is also a university professor and maybe be able to point them in certain types of directions or get them connected to people who have certain types of capacities and abilities and so on and so forth.

Dr. Armon Perry:

So we do all of those things through our alumni group. We try to get them connected to whether it be resources in and around the community, whether it be job opportunities. Whether it be opportunities to get free haircuts or school supplies or again I mentioned employment opportunities, workshops in and around the community. Just inspiring whether it be quotes or memes around holidays just to give them a little bit of a boost to let them know that we're still here for them. We have alumni events on Father's Day this past year. Believe it or not I grilled 450 hot dogs in my backyard and we had a cookout. Not in my backyard. The cookout wasn't in my backyard. But I grilled the hot dogs in my backyard. 450 of them and we had a kickball game at a local park where we were just honoring and recognizing and acknowledging our alumni. Invited them to come out, bring their kids and we had a good time sharing with one another fellowship with one another and goofing off playing kickball.

Dr. Armon Perry:

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So those are the types of things that we do with our alumni group and those are our attempts to make sure that our guys once they graduate they stay connected, because we tell them that the program is more than a program. But indeed it's a brotherhood. So we try to manifest that in whatever ways we can to make sure that our guys continue to stay connected and don't feel like just because they graduated that they're no longer a part of the group. But again I will admit to you that it's not as well resourced as I would like and that's one of the things that I'll certainly correct as we move forward.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah let's cross our fingers that you can find the [inaudible 00:39:43] funding to do that project.

Dr. Armon Perry:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah fingers crossed.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah, yeah. It is, it's so essential that they have this ongoing support. It must be a challenge right now where you can't have the face to face contact with the guys. So, I just want to ask just a couple more questions and then we'll wrap this up. But I'm just wondering to what extent you're able to at the moment to maintain this ongoing support group for the guys? Are you doing individual phone calls to them? Are you able to have virtual groups using platforms like Zoom?

Dr. Armon Perry:

Yeah. So we're doing a number of things and again as you alluded to the coronavirus has necessarily slowed everything down. It literally has shut down earth in some ways, right? But, we're being as responsive as we can using whether it be online platforms, keeping in touch with our guys using social media. The alumni group that I alluded to most of this connection is through our social media and that's the way that we keep in touch with those guys. But we also have some ongoing groups that were still in midstream when all of the shutdowns and quarantines and stay at home orders went into effect. And so, it's been about maybe four or five weeks that we've been working to connect with guys via telephone and again using social media and web based platforms.

Dr. Armon Perry:

We use a good deal of Microsoft Teams because it's one that our university subscribes to and endorsed. I know a lot of people use Zoom. For awhile Zoom was having some security issues and our university was discouraging us from using it. But, we used a great deal of Microsoft Teams in order to stay connected to our guys. Here recently we're able to get our workshops online and so what we'll be doing, actually starting Thursday this week we will commence with some of our groups. The ones that we had ongoing and we'll finish them out in an online environment where the guys will log on and we can send them links and they log on and they'll be able to engage the facilitators. We can share our screens with

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them and post slides and videos and activities. And so, my thinking is it won't be the same as it would be if it was face to face, but it will certainly be a way for us to stay connected, continue to get good information to the guys. Make sure that they know and understand that we're still here for them and we still are reaching out to them. We're still working on their behalf and we're still working to try to provide them where there's a quality of experience as possible.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah. I certainly wish you good luck with that. So, the final thing I'm interested in and I'm really sort of bringing this back to co-parenting as well. Have you been hearing stories from the guys about how their co-parenting situation has been impacted by the coronavirus? Are they able to see their kids as it escalated? Any conflicts? What things are you hearing?

Dr. Armon Perry:

Yeah we get a mixed bag. We get a mixed bag and it ranges everything from when the quarantine started for any number of reasons that may have created an opportunity for some additional gate keeping behavior that could be masked as prudent public health, right? Everything from that to dads who are quarantined with their children's mothers that previously didn't have a romantic relationship, but now they've seen fit or seen it best to stay safe, stay home but do that together. So as to provide a model for their children and share with them the ways in which they come together in challenge of adversity rather than turning on one another, instead they're turning to one another.

Dr. Armon Perry:

Again a little bit of everything in terms of what it is we're seeing and hearing from our dads. But, we're working to stay as connected as possible to all of them so that they know that we're here for them. We're there supporting them. I alluded to our alumni group and our social media presence and one of the things that we've been doing there is we've been scouring the internet and also working with practitioners across the country to gather best practices information around how it is that we can go about co-parenting in a contemporary context that maybe limited in terms of how much connection we can have in person or face to face. We've been sharing that information with folks as best we can. We try to keep everybody as connected as possible.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah, well I wish you all the luck continuing that very important work.

Automation:

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