



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

National
Responsible
Fatherhood Clearinghouse



Recruiting and Retaining Men in Responsible Fatherhood Programs: A Research-to-Practice Brief

Developed by Sarah Avellar at Mathematica Policy Research on behalf of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse under the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance.

Summary

Recruiting and retaining participants are common challenges for programs serving low-income fathers. In this brief, we summarize several promising practices from the Strengthening Families Evidence Review (SFER) on recruitment and retention. The SFER, a systematic review of family-strengthening programs serving low-income fathers or couples, was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research under contract to the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families. This brief focuses on the 90 studies of 70 responsible fatherhood programs included in the SFER. From these, we have culled suggestions on how to plan for recruitment, engage fathers in services, and maintain high rates of participation. The strategies can be tailored to meet the needs of specific programs and fathers. Regardless of the strategies used, however, all programs should be prepared for an intensive effort to recruit and enroll fathers.

Recruitment and Retention: Common Challenges

Recruiting and retaining clients are common challenges for many programs serving low-income, at-risk populations—particularly for those serving fathers. In a recent review of the literature on programs for low-income fathers, recruitment and retention were the most frequently cited implementation problems (Avellar et al. 2011). Many programs reported difficulty meeting their initial enrollment goals, convincing fathers to consistently attend activities, and keeping fathers engaged over time. Clearly, overcoming such difficulties is essential to the success of a program, as fathers cannot benefit from services they do not receive.

Past experiences and ongoing hardships can deter men from entering a fatherhood program. They may not trust social services, for example, because of a previous negative experience involving the criminal justice system or child-support enforcement (CSE) (Greif et al. 2011). Fathers who have substantial child-support obligations and debt may be reluctant to obtain formal employment, which is often a focus of responsible fatherhood programs. Research shows that low-income fathers, on average, are ordered to pay a higher share of their income to child support compared to their better-off counterparts (Huang et al. 2005). In addition, many low-income fathers do not live with their children (Nelson 2004) and may have trouble staying involved in their lives, which could lessen their interest in parenting education and similar services. And finally, low-income men may be highly mobile, making them difficult to reach.

In this brief, we summarize our findings from the Strengthening Families Evidence Review (SFER), a systematic review of research focusing on responsible fatherhood and other family-strengthening programs. SFER was conducted by Mathematica Policy Research under contract to the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation

Take Time to Be a Dad Today

Toll-free: 877-4DAD411 (877-432-3411) | Fax: 703-934-3740 | info@fatherhood.gov | www.fatherhood.gov

 facebook.com/fatherhoodgov

 [@fatherhoodgov](https://twitter.com/fatherhoodgov)

within the Administration for Children and Families. Mathematica identified 90 studies of 70 programs for low-income fathers (the complete results are available at <http://familyreview.acf.hhs.gov>).

Based on these reviews, we compared various program approaches to recruitment and retention, noting any successes or challenges in the research, to develop a list of promising practices. Although these practices are informed by the research, please note that they are not proven; that is, we cannot be certain that these strategies, and not other factors, led to improved recruitment and retention. In addition, many programs reported similar strategies but had divergent results; some reported strong recruitment and participation, whereas others struggled. However, the strategies and considerations presented here are based on the most current research available.

Promising Practices: Recruitment

A successful fatherhood program must be able to attract participants, including identifying eligible fathers, making initial contact, and piquing their interest in the program. In this section, we highlight key issues that should be considered when planning for and conducting recruitment.

A. The Planning Stage

Recruitment begins during program planning, before any fathers are approached about enrolling. Programs may be able to avoid common pitfalls by carefully considering their target population, including their characteristics and concerns, as well as being realistic about fathers' likely interest in specific services. Prepare for an intensive recruitment effort.

Many programs found that recruiting fathers took substantial time and effort, often more than had been expected. One program that had planned for a 9-month recruitment period, for example, found it necessary to extend recruitment to 15 months to enroll the desired number of fathers. Staff in another program that targeted first-time, expectant fathers had to contact fathers between 3 and 20 times before they would consent to participate. To meet these types of challenges, programs should allocate sufficient resources to carry out a lengthy, intensive recruitment effort, depending on the characteristics of the target population and the number of fathers to be recruited.

Use active recruitment strategies.

Active recruitment requires program staff to approach fathers directly. For example, some program staff recruit at community events such as health fairs, whereas others recruit in more formal service-delivery settings, such as social service agencies or health clinics. When developing an approach, programs should consider whether their target population includes fathers who are still involved with the mothers of their children. If so, recruitment could take place in settings like prenatal clinics, where fathers sometimes accompany their partners. Other programs rely on agencies that serve noncustodial fathers, such as CSE offices or courts that handle child-support orders. Some program staff attended child-support hearings, for example, or were stationed in CSE offices. Many fatherhood programs rely on street outreach, visiting popular hangouts for men in the neighborhood, such as basketball courts and barber shops, to provide information about the program.

In contrast, passive recruitment requires the father to contact the program if he is interested. Examples include posting flyers, sending mass mailings, and conducting community-wide advertising campaigns. Regardless of the specific strategy, the literature suggests that passive recruitment does not work well. For

example, several programs began by relying primarily on mass mailings because it requires minimal staff time and is low cost, but few fathers responded. This was true regardless of the size of the mailing or whether the program used a targeted database, such as fathers with active child-support orders. One program mailed out 515 letters and received only 11 responses, whereas another mailed out 300 invitations, which yielded three interested fathers. A third program received no responses to its mailing. Community-wide advertising also yielded few participants but may boost recognition of the program, which can be advantageous when coupled with active recruitment.

Define eligibility criteria broadly to allow a sufficient number of fathers to enroll.

Some programs developed narrow eligibility criteria in an effort to target services. They later discovered that they could not find enough fathers who met the criteria, prompting them to relax their requirements. The most common problematic restriction was age. Many programs wanted to focus on young fathers, in their teens and twenties, possibly because they hoped to intervene when fathers were still involved with the mother of their child or before he was involved in the child-support system. A common finding in the research, however, is that young fathers are particularly hard to recruit and serve, and thus the programs often could not attract enough young fathers. Other problematic restrictions included requiring fathers to be unemployed (rather than underemployed), to have no current involvement with the child-support system, or to live within narrow geographic boundaries. One program focused on fathers with monthly child-support orders that were the lowest amount legally allowed. Staff found that the fathers were very disadvantaged and not interested in formal employment.

Conversely, though less commonly, broad eligibility criteria also created problems. One program, which offered training, education, job placement, and fatherhood-development activities, did not have an income requirement. Staff found that most fathers recruited for the program were employed and thus not interested in employment services, a main component of the program.

Consider a wide range of referral and recruitment sources.

Most programs relied on a variety of referral sources, including other agencies and databases, as well as venues for active recruitment, such as community events. Recruiting from multiple sources can augment the flow of new enrollees—for example, the slow pace of referrals from one agency can be offset by the fast pace from another. Working with a range of agencies may also help programs identify fathers with a mix of characteristics, such as diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds or employment histories.

Few programs could rely on only one referral source, but some referral sources were particularly productive. One program found that one-stop centers and family courts were fruitful referral sources for fathers who were interested in employment services. Another program, which provided employment services and parenting education, focused on recruiting formerly incarcerated fathers and received a steady stream of referrals from the criminal justice system.

Although results were mixed, research showed that, by working with programs for families, mothers, and children, some programs were able to recruit fathers through their children's mothers. To make this strategy effective, however, staff could not assume that fathers would visit the same places frequented by the mothers, such as health clinics and preschools. Instead, mothers had to identify and help locate their children's fathers. This was not successful in all programs, however. In some, mothers were reluctant to reveal partnerships if they feared losing public-assistance benefits or public housing. Research also indicated that

staff in programs that traditionally enrolled mothers and children, such as Head Start, sometimes did not want to encourage fathers' involvement in their children's lives. Fathers, too, were resistant if they felt the program was for mothers or that program staff were not welcoming. To overcome these challenges, programs educated staff about the benefits of father involvement for children, and some hired male staff members to help fathers feel more at ease.

Identify recruitment staff who are experienced and motivated.

In active recruitment, staff are the face of the program and are responsible for persuading fathers to enroll. These staff must be able to build rapport with fathers and express enthusiasm about the program and its benefits. Some programs found that the most effective recruiters had previous experience working with the target population and were familiar with the community.

Keeping staff motivated is important given the challenges of recruiting and the reality that recruiters will likely encounter more refusals than acceptances. Some programs provided monetary incentives for achieving recruitment targets. Other rewarded staff with pizza parties, dress-down privileges, and other perks. Identify characteristics of the target population and the program that may create barriers to enrollment, and develop strategies for overcoming those barriers.

Despite a program's best efforts, some fathers will not participate. Fathers facing many challenges in their lives—such as lack of transportation, unstable housing, and unpredictable work schedules—may find it difficult to join the program. The research shows that fathers in their teens and twenties were particularly hard to engage. If these fathers are the target of the program, staff should expect to devote considerable resources to recruitment and retention.

Program characteristics may also affect participation. For example, a program that had previously served mostly mothers and children encountered resistance from fathers who thought the services were not for men. The program had to change its image in the fathers' eyes, using strategies such as planning meetings around fathers' schedules and treating fathers as key players in fostering their children's well-being. As noted earlier, some fathers have had previous negative experiences with social services agencies, which can breed distrust of these systems. Fathers were hesitant to take part in programs that were working with CSE agencies. To overcome this challenge, one program avoided advertising its relationship with CSE to increase fathers' comfort with the program.

B. The Recruiting Stage

Careful planning of the recruitment process can eliminate some challenges, but programs must also monitor progress after recruitment begins, identify challenges that arise, and make needed adjustments. For example, a program may find that initial referral sources are not appropriate or that more buy-in is needed from influential community members.

Assess the success of recruitment strategies and sources, and be flexible about making changes.

Even with thoughtful planning, staff may need to adjust their approach over time. Referral sources, recruiting venues, or strategies do not always work as expected. For example, some programs relied on mandatory child-support hearings as a venue for recruiting, but they later discovered that noncustodial parents often do not appear at their hearings and that repercussions for missing the hearings, such as bench warrants, were often not enforced. Another program started with recruitment strategies that had worked well for mothers, but

staff later realized that their approach needed fine-tuning to better reach fathers. Yet another program planned to recruit fathers at health care clinics before or after prenatal visits, but after learning that some fathers did not attend these appointments with their partners, the program modified its strategy to include visiting fathers in their homes.

Obtain buy-in from peers and influential community members.

The best way to recruit fathers is to build support among their peers. Participants who are pleased with their experiences may tell their friends about the program and, indeed, the research suggests that word-of-mouth may be one of the most effective recruitment strategies.

Community support for the program is also valuable. Some buy-in can only be obtained by running a program that meets the community's needs, but programs also should consider reaching out to community members to educate them about the program, services available, and benefits for fathers and their children. One program concluded that creating a steering committee made up of community leaders and members provided an opportunity to educate these influential leaders about the program and to obtain their endorsement.

Promising Practices: Retention

After program staff recruit fathers, the next critical task is engaging them in services and keeping them engaged over time. Fathers, particularly those with numerous barriers, may need continual outreach to keep them involved. In this section, we discuss strategies for promoting fathers' sustained participation. Make programs father-friendly.

Making fathers feel welcome and integral to the program is important, particularly for programs that used to provide services only or mostly to mothers and children. For the programs described in the research, simply extending services to men was not enough to overcome the perception that the program was for women. It was also necessary to use strategies such as hiring male staff and offering services in a neutral or male-oriented location, rather than in female-oriented locations such as maternal health clinics. Staff also built relationships and rapport with fathers to keep them engaged in the program, just as they did for mothers (for example, by learning about their personal and family goals).

Consider the effects of program duration and intensity on participation.

Programs must strike a balance between program intensity and participation rates. In theory, a longer or more intensive program may have a stronger impact on fathers because of their greater exposure to the services. But a longer program also increases the demands on fathers' time, which may lower participation or retention. For example, one program was originally offered as six sessions, but fathers were unwilling to commit to that many sessions. The program sessions were reduced to two. Similarly, during the pilot testing of another program, participants expressed a preference for a shorter program, and so services were offered twice a week, rather than once, to reduce duration from four to two months.

Reducing or condensing services could help increase participation and thus enhance program effectiveness. There are drawbacks, however, including the fact that it may be difficult to cover all material in a shorter amount of time. A shorter program also means less time for participants to absorb the information. Because the current research does not provide clear evidence on the link between the intensity and length of a program and its effectiveness, programs should weigh the theoretical considerations, such as the goals of the program and the intensity of services required to achieve those goals.

Design the program to be culturally focused.

Many programs that serve diverse target populations recognize the importance of delivering services that are culturally appropriate and sensitive. Materials, including the concepts and examples used, should be relevant to participants, addressing issues such as parents' roles in the family or language barriers. Staff should be accepting of different cultural traditions and viewpoints. In one program that struggled with retention, the focus was on play and positive reinforcement. The researchers concluded that this approach conflicted with the preferred authoritarian parenting style of the primarily Hispanic fathers, thus diminishing participation. Programs that primarily serve one racial or ethnic group might consider designing a program tailored specifically for that group. Two programs in the review were designed for African American men. Along with parenting, these programs addressed topics such as men's empowerment, African heritage, racism, and racial socialization of children. Both programs had excellent participation. With only two studies, the research base on this approach is limited, and it is unclear whether the participation rates were because of the cultural focus or other characteristics of these programs. The programs were also small—with about 20 participants in one and 150 in the other—and thus the outcomes may not extend to a larger program. The results, however, suggest that these programs appealed to participants in a way that sustained participation.

Consider using common practices, with the understanding that they may not be sufficient to achieve high participation.

The research on fatherhood programs highlights a number of promising strategies, as listed below. Their effectiveness is unknown, however, with only some programs reporting that the strategies improved participation. Given this uncertainty, the strategies may need to be combined with other elements.

1. Offer services in-house rather than through referrals to other agencies. Staff members are typically better able to encourage and track participation in services that are offered within the agency compared to those offered elsewhere.
2. Provide peer support groups. In at least one program, peer group sessions on parenting were better attended than were other services, such as work readiness.
3. Schedule events during hours that fathers are less likely to be working, such as evenings and weekends. Most fathers will prioritize their work commitments over the program activities.
4. Provide program supports, such as transportation, meals, or child care. For example, providing meals helps fathers who are rushing to the program from work or other commitments, and may create an opportunity for bonding and building rapport.
5. Conduct regular outreach with fathers to stay in touch. Several programs found it necessary to repeatedly reach out to fathers to remind them about upcoming activities and encourage their attendance.
6. Piggyback on another service. One program, for example, offered fathers informational group sessions when mothers were coming in for prenatal check-ups. This program was able to build on the mother's motivation to attend another service to increase fathers' participation.
7. Offer an array of services to meet fathers' diverse needs. Many low-income fathers face multiple challenges and could benefit from a variety of services. At least one program found that offering several services or referrals made the program more appealing.
8. Offer make-up sessions for group activities. This allows fathers to receive services even if they are not able to attend at a particular time. Not only can this boost participation, but it shows fathers that the program is trying to be flexible to meet their needs.

9. Provide incentives, such as money, diapers, toys, or recognition for participation, such as a graduation certificate. These strategies help communicate to the fathers that their participation is valuable and provides recognition for their efforts. Certificates, for example, are a concrete way to acknowledge fathers' achievements.

Clearly convey the benefits of the program to fathers, while managing their expectations.

Fatherhood programs are typically designed to meet fathers' needs, but if fathers do not think the services are worthwhile, they may drop out. One study revealed that when services focused on increasing child support payments, fathers felt no direct benefit, since the money went to the mothers of their children. Programs may therefore want to incorporate services that improve fathers' personal circumstances, such as those that focus on employment or men's well-being.

Fathers should have a clear understanding of what to expect from the program. Although many programs found that stressing employment was a good way to attract fathers, one program discovered that fathers became frustrated if they did not quickly find a job. Thus, while motivating fathers to attend, program staff should be careful not to gloss over challenges that fathers may encounter, even with program assistance.

As with recruitment, consider how fathers' characteristics may be related to participation.

Fathers with certain characteristics may be particularly difficult to engage. These include young fathers—who also are difficult to recruit—and disadvantaged fathers with multiple barriers. Programs interested in serving these groups will likely need to make intensive, repeated efforts to boost their participation.

Programs offered to incarcerated fathers often, but not always, had high levels of participation. Incarcerated men are likely easier to track compared to other fathers, and they may be more willing to engage in services because they have fewer alternatives or distractions. One exception is a program that found that incarcerated fathers' other commitments, such as court dates, interfered with program attendance. Post-release activities, however, were often poorly attended. For example, one program found that fathers would only participate once or twice after their release. Another found that the commitments required for parole and probation left little time for the program.

Be aware that even mandatory programs can have participation problems.

Mandating participation did not necessarily guarantee high rates of attendance. Mandatory programs are typically linked with CSE; for example, one program offered those who were delinquent on child support three options: pay child support, participate in the program, or go to prison. Participation in mandatory programs like these ranged from 50 to 100 percent. Follow-through on repercussions for noncompliance, such as bench warrants or jail time, may have increased these rates. If there are no repercussions, however, mandating participation may not have any effect.

Regard employment as a success, even if it reduces participation.

Employment is a common focus of fatherhood programs, but a few programs found that, once employed, fathers tended to drop out of services. Having a job likely decreased the fathers' free time and may have conflicted with the schedule of program activities. This could be considered a participation problem, but if employment is a program goal, it could be considered an achievement instead. It does mean, however, that fathers are not receiving other program services, such as parenting or communication skills, and thus programs may need to prioritize their goals.



Looking Forward

Recruitment and retention are common challenges for fatherhood programs, and there is no quick fix. In general, programs should be prepared to make an intensive effort to meet recruitment goals and to keep fathers engaged, especially if working with groups such as young fathers. Programs should develop a clear plan of action, taking into consideration the recommendations described in this brief. For successful recruiting, programs should identify referral sources or locations that fathers frequent; staff who can quickly build rapport with fathers; and fathers' concerns that might hinder recruiting, such as program partnerships with CSE. Engaging fathers in the program will require offering services that appeal to fathers and meet their needs, and providing ways to ease any barriers to attending, such as transportation supports or offering condensed services. Programs also should be flexible and willing to try different techniques as they learn what does and does not work to engage fathers. Ultimately, providing services that help fathers realize their goals is likely to be one of the best ways to attain strong participation and recruitment, as word of the program's successes spreads.



References

Avellar, Sarah, M. Robin Dion, Andrew Clarkwest, Heather Zaveri, Subuhi Asheer, Kelley Borradaile, Megan Hague Angus, Timothy Novak, Julie Redline, and Marykate Zukiewicz. (2011). *Catalog of Research: Programs for Low-Income Fathers*, OPRE Report # 2011-20, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Greif, Geoffrey L., Joseph T. Jones, Jr., James Worthy, Eddie White, Will Davis, and Edward Pitchford. "Working with Urban, African American Fathers: The Importance of Service Provision, Joining, Accountability, the Father-Child Relationship, and Couples Work." *Journal of Family Social Work*, vol. 14, 2011, pp. 247–261.

Huang, Chien-Chung, Ronald B. Mincy, and Irwin Garfinkel. "Child Support Obligations and Low-Income Fathers." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 67, 2005, pp. 1213–1225.

Nelson, Timothy J. "Low-Income Fathers." *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 30, 2004, pp. 427–451.