Fatherhood Research & Practice Network

www.frpn.org

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Framing the Future of Co-parenting Evaluation Research for the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network

Paul Florsheim, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

&

Alan J. Hawkins, Brigham Young University

Co-Chairs

Co-parenting/Healthy Relationships Workgroup

Fatherhood Research and Practice Network (FRPN)

Workgroup Members

Jennifer Acker, Phil Cowan, Ronald Cox, Jay Fagan,

Anne Menard, Jessica Pearson and Scott Stanley

FRPN Co-Director Jay Fagan, PhD | *Professor, Temple University School of Social Work*
Ritter Hall Annex, 5th Floor | Philadelphia, PA 19122 | (215) 204-1288 | jfagan@temple.edu

FRPN Co-Director Jessica Pearson, PhD | *Director, Center for Policy Research*
1570 Emerson Street | Denver, CO 80218 | (303) 837-1555 | jspearson@centerforpolicyresearch.org

FRPN Coordinator Rebecca Kaufman, MSW | *Temple University*
Ritter Hall Annex, 6th Floor | Philadelphia, PA 19122 | (215) 204-5706 | rebecca.kaufman@temple.edu

Traditionally, the institution of marriage has played an important role in society, helping to hold families together through difficult times. Because of the recent changes in how families are defined and constructed (Furstenberg, 2011), there is a need to develop new strategies – and perhaps new institutions – to help fathers and mothers learn to co-parent their children, regardless of whether or not they are married or romantically involved. In particular, there is a need to help mothers and fathers of fragile families co-parent. Fragile families have been defined as families in which mother-father partnerships face greater risks than more traditional families do in terms of their economic security and relationship stability (McLanahan, Garfinkel, Mincy, & Donahue, 2010).

Co-parenting has been defined as "the ways that parents work together in their roles as parents" (Feinberg, 2003, p. 96). Indeed there is emerging evidence from co-parenting intervention research which suggests that improvements in couples' relationship functioning are linked to positive father involvement and to positive outcomes for children (Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010). However, we are still in the early stages of establishing a research base to guide the implementation of co-parenting interventions. Given the multiple disadvantages that children in fragile families experience, the development of empirically supported programs to support cooperative co-parenting has become a major priority for family focused researchers, practitioners and policy makers.

The Fatherhood Research and Practice Network (FRPN) convened a workgroup in late 2013 to identify the specific gaps in evaluations of co-parenting and healthy relationship programs. The following recommendations were identified by the group:

1. **Identify critical components or active ingredients in co-parenting counseling/education.** Most of the research on co-parenting programs is designed to address the basic question of whether a program – as a whole – works. This research is useful – it is important to know that a program works – but it is also useful to know *how* a program works. Co-parenting programs tend to include an array of educational and relationship-focused components, such as "active listening," "problem solving" or "stress reduction." To date, there has been no research designed to identify the "active ingredients" or critical components of co-parenting interventions. Research that tells us how a program works can help practitioners become more efficient and effective.

2. **Test specific modes of program delivery**. It is also important to compare the effectiveness of different strategies for delivering services and the extent that the effectiveness varies for different cultures, ethnic groups, and others. Co-parenting programs are administered in different doses, using different modalities (e.g., couple focused or individual focused) at different stages of the parenting process (e.g., prenatal and early childhood) and in different settings (e.g., courts, clinics, and homes). For example, co-parenting program developers (including those in the FRPN) have mixed opinions regarding the feasibility and efficacy of providing co-parenting education/support to: (1) the individual couple or dyad; (2) groups of couples; (3) gender-specific groups of individual parents (fathers or mothers only); or (4) mixed-gender groups of individual parents. Rather than presume one mode is better than

another, research is needed that comparatively tests the efficacy of different approaches with the ultimate goal of identifying what works best for specific groups and subgroups. Having a diverse set of approaches makes sense given the vast diversity of co-parenting couples with different needs and proclivities. Moreover, previous research on "common factors" in psychotherapy research suggests that *how* an intervention is delivered can be as important as *what* is being delivered (Snyder & Halford, 2012). Thus, there is some value in determining the relative effectiveness of different approaches, particularly if some approaches may not be effective at all.

3. **Examine adaptations of promising interventions for use with fragile families**. Co-parenting program developers are just beginning to address the issue of "adaptability" or whether a program developed for one group can be effectively modified for use with another group (Parra Cardona et al., 2012; Barrera & Castro, 2006). Research that modifies and adapts existing programs helps us avoid the common tendency to "reinvent the wheel." While there is certainly value in building local programs from the ground up – and sometimes this is necessary – we endorse a model of dissemination that is oriented toward the adaptation of existing co-parenting programs that have some evidence of efficacy.

4. **Focus on diversity among couples in evaluations**. The population of fragile families is large and diverse and it seems safe to assume that different types of couples will have different needs with respect to co-parenting education and support. For example, a 15-year-old adolescent couple may need a different approach to co-parenting than a 20-year-old young adult couple; a high-conflict couple may require a different set of skills than a "disengaged" couple; an impoverished African American couple in Milwaukee may need a different level of support than a White working-class couple in Salt Lake City. A father who has no contact with his children may need help establishing his rights to visitation before he can reasonably address co-parenting issues with his "partner." However, it is also plausible that some co-parenting education and support services may be generically useful across different groups of fragile families. Rigorous evaluations of co-parenting interventions can help to determine which co-parenting programs work for which types of fathers and mothers.

5. **Test methods to increase accessibility and attractiveness of co-parenting programs**. The challenges of recruiting fragile families into psychoeducational programs are formidable (Hawkins & Ooms, 2012). Co-parenting programs are often under-enrolled and retaining participants can be difficult, expensive, and labor intensive. Researchers and providers have utilized a number of strategies for increasing enrollment and retention among fragile families attending co-parenting programs. While these strategies seem intuitively correct, they have not been empirically tested. Because many co-parenting programs report relatively low rates of participation, we believe it is important to conduct research designed to identify ways to increase the appeal and accessibility of co-parenting support/education. New possibilities for engaging couples in co-parenting programs continue to emerge and it is important for researchers and practitioners to remain attentive to the opportunities that

arise as policies and practices change. For example, there is recent interest in creating state policies that encourage or require unmarried parents with new child support orders to also establish parenting time orders to help insure that fathers have access to their children.

The complex lives of fragile families provide family researchers with a number of challenges and difficult choices when it comes to designing, implementing, and testing co-parenting programs. This report was written to provide a rudimentary road map for guiding the next round of co-parenting program studies designed to answer the fundamental question: What works for fragile families?

References

Barrera, M., & Castro, F. (2006). A Heuristic Framework for the Cultural Adaptation of Interventions. *Clinical Psychology: Science And Practice*, *13*(4), 311-316.

Cowan, P. A., Cowan, C. P., & Knox, V. (2010). Marriage and fatherhood programs. *The Future of Children, 20*(2), 205-230.

Feinberg, M. E. (2003). The internal structure and ecological context of coparenting: A framework for research and intervention. *Parenting: Science and Practice,3,* 95-131.

Furstenberg, F.F. (2011). The recent transformation of the American family: Witnessing and exploring social change. In M.J Carlson & P. England (Eds.) *Social class and changing families in an unequal America*. (pp 192-220).

Hawkins, A. J., & Ooms, T. (2012). Can marriage and relationship education be an effective policy tool to help low-income couples form and sustain healthy marriages and relationships? A review of lessons learned. *Marriage & Family Review, 48*, 524–554.

McLanahan, S., Garfinkel, I., Mincy, R. B., & Donahue, E. (2010). Introducing the issue. *Future of Children, 20*(2), 3-16.

Parra Cardona, J., Domenech-Rodriguez, M., Forgatch, M., Sullivan, C., Bybee, D., Holtrop, K., & ... Bernal, G. (2012). Culturally adapting an evidence-based parenting intervention for Latino immigrants: The need to integrate fidelity and cultural relevance. *Family Process*, *51*(1), 56-72.

Snyder, D. K., & Halford, W. K. (2012). Evidence-based couple therapy: Current status and future directions. *Journal of Family Therapy, 34*, 229–249. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6427.2012.00599.x