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## An Innovative Approach to Improving Father-Child Relationships for Fathers who are Noncompliant with Child Support Payments: A Mixed Methods Evaluation

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# An Innovative Approach to Improving Father-Child Relationships for Fathers who are Noncompliant with Child Support Payments: A Mixed Methods Evaluation

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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## Introduction

There is a growing trend in the criminal justice system where strength-based services are being offered in lieu of incarceration to fathers who are noncompliant with child support payments. There appears to be a need for innovative approaches to increasing compliance with child support payments, especially when one in three mothers who are eligible for child support did not have a child support order and half of mothers who had child support orders were not receiving any payments (Huang, 2009). In an attempt to improve compliance with child support agreements, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) has advocated for policies that encourage collaboration among mothers and fathers in determining the barriers to paying child support. This approach has resulted in a paradigm shift where noncompliance with child support payments is being managed in a rehabilitative manner as compared to the traditional punitive approach of incarceration. The specific goals of new policies are: 1) preventing the need for child support enforcement; 2) engaging fathers from the birth of their first child; 3) promoting family economic stability; 4) helping build healthy family relationships; 5) ensuring that families have meaningful health care coverage; and 6) preventing and reducing family violence (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Child Support Enforcement, 2012). This innovative approach to addressing noncompliance with child support payments has demonstrated promising outcomes, including evidence that fathers who see their children frequently are more likely to pay child support and maintain an active relationship with their children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Nepomnyaschy, 2007). This paper contributes to the growing knowledge base on these innovative programs by presenting the findings from a mixed methods evaluation of the Fathers Offering Children Unfailing Support (FOCUS) program, which is a criminal justice diversion program designed to offer an alternative to incarceration for fathers who are noncompliant with child support payments.

In a recent evaluation of a program similar to FOCUS, Luckey and Potts (2011) found that fathers who were enrolled in the program showed improved relationships with their children and the mother of their children. Specifically, throughout the program, 31% of participants reported that the relationship with the mother of their children improved and 55% reported having increased contact with their children (Luckey & Potts, 2011). Additionally, in an evaluation of noncustodial fathers who chose to participate in a substance abuse and parenting education program in lieu of incarceration, the majority of fathers who reported positive relationships with the mother of their children saw their children at least once a week, as compared to less than once a month for fathers who reported very poor relationships (Walker, Reid, & Logan, 2010).

Compliance with child support payments, the quality of the mother-father relationship, and how often fathers have contact with their children appear to be strongly correlated with each other. Previous research has suggested that positive mother-father relationships increases the likelihood of fathers having more frequent contact with their children (Coley & Hernandez, 2006), and fathers who have frequent contact with their children are more likely to comply with child support agreements (Arditti & Keith, 1993; Dudley, 1991, Sonenstein & Calhoun, 1990; Walker, Reid, & Logan, 2010; Wright & Price, 1986). Dudley (1991), for example, found that having shared physical and legal custody and having more contact with their children significantly increased compliance with child support payments.

Qualitative studies have also provided an in-depth view on the barriers to paying child support and improving family relationships. Through the use of individual interviews, Laakso (2004) found that custodial mothers contemplated many factors when deciding the frequency of contact that their children will have with their fathers. Interestingly, fathers' compliance with child support payments was not necessary for visitation (Laakso, 2004). Conversely, mothers were more likely to allow their children to have visitation with their fathers if they believed the child would benefit from the relationship and that the child would be safe in the fathers' environment (Laakso, 2004). In another qualitative study that collected data through focus groups with both mothers and fathers, Bloomer, Sipe, and Ruedt (2002) found that mothers and fathers shared different beliefs on barriers to compliance with child support payments and frequent visitation with children. Common barriers to compliance with child support payments for the fathers were unemployment, having a poor relationship with the mother of their child, and mistrust on how the money was going to be spent (Bloomer, Sipe, & Ruedt, 2002). Conversely, barriers to fathers paying child support, from the mothers' views, were fathers financially supporting other children in their new relationships, fathers' substance abuse, and getting paid under the table (Bloomer, Sipe, & Ruedt, 2002).

Previous studies have recommended that social service programs expand services beyond simply offering resources for employment to fathers who are noncompliant with child support payments and begin to utilize a holistic approach in addressing the unique needs of fathers (Walker, Reid, & Logan, 2010), as well as the needs of mothers (Huang, 2009). A holistic approach may include identifying and resolving the barriers to a healthy mother-father relationship and providing fathers increased opportunity to promote their parenting skills. Coley and Hernandez (2006) have also recommended that policies and programs designed to increase compliance with child support payments focus on increasing

fathers' involvement with their children and promoting positive family relationships. Huang (2006) recommended that more research is needed to learn about fathers' perceptions on how they spend their time with their children and how the context on this interaction impacts the children. This study, guided by the before mentioned recommendations, contributes to the literature by evaluating the FOCUS program, which uses a nonadversarial, holistic approach to increasing child support compliance.

### **What is the F.O.C.U.S. Program?**

The Fathers Offering Children Unfailing Support (FOCUS) program has been in operation since 2001. FOCUS is a court-ordered program for men who are delinquent in their child support payments. The 10-week program offered in weekly, 2-hour classes exposes the participants to a curriculum designed to help men stay focused on their lifelong role and responsibility as a father. The program curriculum uses a strengths-based approach, facilitation versus teaching, and a masculine model as its philosophy. The specific goals of the program are to: 1) benefit children by increasing their fathers' emotional support; 2) strengthen co-parenting relationships; and 3) promote fathers' parenting skills. The program is based on the following values:

1. Children need both their mothers and their fathers.
2. Participants care about their children and want to be the best dads they can be; they are not bad dads.
3. It's never too late to develop a relationship with your children.
4. Mothers and fathers parent distinctly different and both styles are valuable to children.
5. Fathers can only control themselves and not the mother of their child.
6. Fathers need to work in partnership with their child's mother to benefit their children.

### **Research Questions**

This study evaluated whether FOCUS was effectively meeting its goals. Quantitative data were collected to measure the level of knowledge acquisition and attitude change of the participants, and qualitative data were collected to learn about participants' and key stakeholders' perceptions of the program. There were three specific research questions for this study.

1. Does participation in the FOCUS program benefit children by increasing their fathers' emotional support?
2. Does participation in the FOCUS program strengthen co-parenting relationships?
3. Does participation in the FOCUS program promote fathers' parenting skills?

## **Methodology**

Mixed methods were used to evaluate whether the FOCUS program was effectively meeting its goals of: 1) benefiting children by increasing their fathers' emotional support; 2) strengthening co-parenting relationships; and 3) promoting fathers' parenting skills. Quantitative data were collected through a pretest-posttest design. Qualitative data were collected through two methods, including telephone interviews with FOCUS instructors and community key stakeholders and focus groups with FOCUS participants. The program evaluation commenced following approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Texas at Arlington (UTA). Written informed consent was received from all research participants.

## **Quantitative Research Design**

Quantitative data were collected through a single group, pretest-posttest design. At the request of FOCUS administrators, the researchers developed a survey for this study; the survey questions are noted in Table 1. The survey was administered to FOCUS participants at the first and last session of the program. The survey used a Likert scale which measured the participants' level of agreement to a specific statement or question. The information gathered from the survey provided a summary of participants' changes in attitude towards their role and responsibility as a father and changes in attitude towards their relationship with their child's mother. Paired t-tests were used to identify the statistical significance of change among participants from pretest and posttest.

## **Qualitative Research Design**

Qualitative data were collected through telephone interviews with FOCUS stakeholders (n = 5) and FOCUS instructors (n = 2), and focus groups with FOCUS participants (n = 76). The focus groups were facilitated with participants during the final class of the program. The participants met with the researchers in small groups, ranging from 3 to 5 participants, and discussed various aspects of the program. Qualitative data were collected to provide an in-depth

understanding of the participants' views related to the curriculum, overall satisfaction with the program, and how the program has impacted their relationships with their children. Additionally, telephone interviews were held with program instructors and community key stakeholders to provide a picture of how non-participants view the program, in regards to topics such as why they support the program and suggestions on how to expand the program. The key stakeholders had a variety of roles in the program and relationships with FOCUS participants. The key stakeholders were program administrators, a state representative from the Office of the Attorney General of Texas Child Support Division, and county law enforcement officials, such as the director of community supervision and the judge that managed the child support cases for the men in the FOCUS program. The questions asked to the program instructors and community key stakeholders during the telephone interviews are noted in Appendix A. The questions asked to FOCUS participants during the focus groups are noted in Appendix B.

The qualitative data collection and analysis was guided by a phenomenological perspective. The goal of the phenomenological perspective was to capture the lived experiences of participants, with an understanding that the sharing of lived experiences can provide in-depth answers to the research questions (Padgett, 2008). During the telephone interviews and focus groups, the researchers took notes on participants' responses to the open-ended questions noted in Appendix A and B. Additionally, the researchers used probing questions, as needed, to encourage research participants to give specific examples from their lived experiences.

The analysis of the qualitative data was completed in an ongoing manner. The qualitative data analysis followed a four-step process, as suggested by Padgett (2008) and Rubin and Babbie (2008). First, the analysis began with open coding to identify the key points conveyed by the research participants. Second, axial coding procedures were used to group data, identify codes, and develop a conceptual framework for the findings. Third, the codes were displayed on a matrix, and codes with similar data were grouped as themes. Throughout the coding process, memo-writing was used to document the meaning of codes, note theoretical thoughts about the data, and assist with the overall organization of the data (Padgett, 2008; Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Fourth, direct quotes from the research participants were used to highlight each theme. Themes were identified when there were consistent responses among the research sample and enough data were retrieved to conceptualize each theme; all the themes that emerged from the data are reported in this article. During the process of data collection and

analysis, strategies of triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing were used to enhance the rigor and validity of the qualitative data.

### **Quantitative Findings**

During this study, 98 men participated in the program; 81.63% (n = 80) graduated from the program and 18.37% (n = 18) of the men dropped out of the program. Of the 80 men that graduated from the program, the researchers were able to collect pretest and posttest data from 68.75% (n = 55) of the participants. Only the participants that completed both tests (n = 55) were included in the data analysis. The pretest and posttest questions and results are noted in Table 1.

Table 1

*Results of the pretest-posttest data*

Question	Likert Scale	Pretest Mean (n = 55)	Posttest Mean (n = 55)	p	t
1: How would you rate the level of conflict between you and your child's mother?	No Conflict = 1 Constant Conflict = 5	2.83	2.75	.72	.37
2: Under current circumstances, how much influence do you think you have in your child's life?	Someone Else Has All The Influence = 1 Great Influence = 5	3.48	3.84	< .05 *	-2.14
3: I need to develop more parenting skills.	No need = 1 Great need = 5	2.58	2.72	.51	-.67
4: I know my strengths as a father.	Not sure = 1 Very sure = 5	4.32	4.56	.09	-1.73
5: How do you see your child's relationship to his or her mother?	Not positive = 1 Very positive = 5	3.20	3.72	< .05 *	-2.68
6: How do you see your relationship to your child?	Not positive = 1 Very positive = 5	3.96	4.43	< .05 *	-2.51
7: I have a role in the kind of adult my child will become.	No role = 1 Very clear role = 5	3.84	4.04	.18	-1.35
8: I know how to communicate well with my children at various ages.	No communication = 1 Open and clear communication = 5	4.42	4.48	.54	-.62
9: I feel connected to the child I am in this class for.	Not connected = 1 Very connected = 5	3.96	4.29	< .05 *	-2.27

Note: The Likert scale for each question ranged from 1 to 5. The p values are based on the results of paired t-tests; statistically significant p values are noted with an \*.

There are several notable findings from Table 1. Overall, the pretest and posttest data suggest that by the end of the 10-week program, the FOCUS program assisted fathers in developing an improved relationship with their children. Participants felt that they had more influence in their child's life ( $t = -2.14$ ;  $p < .05$ ), had a more positive relationship with their child ( $t = -2.51$ ;  $p < .05$ ), were more connected to their child ( $t = -2.27$ ;  $p < .05$ ), and had an improved perception of their child's relationship to his or her mother ( $t = -2.68$ ;  $p < .05$ ). The participants themselves experienced a slight decrease (from 2.83 to 2.75) in the level of conflict between them and their child's mother; however, this decrease was minimal and not statistically significant ( $t = .37$ ;  $p = .72$ ).

Next, the results of question 4 show that the participants began the program with confidence in knowing their strengths as a father and this awareness of strengths was maintained at a high level throughout the program ( $t = -1.73$ ;  $p = .09$ ). Likewise, the results of question 8 show a slight increase (from 4.42 to 4.48) in knowledge on how to communicate with their child at various ages, but the increase was not statistically significant ( $t = -.62$ ;  $p = .54$ ). This seems to demonstrate that the participants, at both the beginning and end of the program, believed that they knew how to communicate well with their child at various ages.

### **Qualitative Findings**

Qualitative data for the program evaluation were received through focus groups with FOCUS participants and the telephone interviews with FOCUS instructors and community key stakeholders. During the evaluation, 76 of the 98 (77.55%) FOCUS participants who attended at least one session chose to participate in a focus group. A total of 20 focus groups were facilitated. The length of each focus group ranged from approximately 30 to 40 minutes. Seven telephone interviews were facilitated, 2 with FOCUS instructors and 5 with community key stakeholders. The length of the telephone interviews ranged from 20 to 30 minutes. The qualitative analysis resulted in several major themes being extracted from the data. Throughout the telephone interviews and focus groups, a number of major thoughts and ideas were expressed consistently by the research participants. The themes that emerged from the data are presented in reference to each question asked of the participants. The themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the FOCUS program and its perceived benefits, strengths, needs for improvement, and potential for expansion on a state and national level.

**Community key stakeholder and instructor telephone interviews.** Findings from the telephone interviews are reported in reference to each question asked of the participants.

1) How is the program an asset to your work?

The child support enforcement stakeholders view the program as a primary tool for enforcement. The participants are court ordered to participate in the program resulting in high attendance. It is a resource for men who are noncompliant with child support payments. They also see it as a means to help men become better parents. The child support enforcement program provides a series of services to help men manage their legal, personal, and financial obligations. FOCUS changes their attitudes towards their requirement to pay child support, and their attitude towards being a parent.

2) Why do you participate?

The stakeholders see the program as a benefit to the men; they see changes in the men and their attitudes, and the relationship with their children improves. When they have a connection with their children child support payments increase. They believe that it is better for a child to have two parents in their life and the program helps to accomplish that goal. The program helps meet the goal of having men pay their child support.

3) What changes do you see with the participants?

Although not all the stakeholders have direct contact with the program participants during and after the program, those that do indicated a number of positive changes. They describe the participants at first as angry for being mandated to participate in the program and not wanting to attend. In the ensuing weeks, the attitude changes and the men start feeling better about themselves and it makes a difference in children's lives. They are able to focus on what is really important: their relationship with their children.

4) Why do you support the program?

The stakeholders were unanimous in their view that the program helps increase compliance with child support payments but most importantly, FOCUS helps improve relationships between fathers and their children. Not only does the program benefit the participants, it also benefits the state. The program makes a difference, a true difference in the life of people. The other parents, the mothers have said they see a difference in the dads. They see the outcome of the program as fathers having more

contact with their children and being able to financially and emotionally support their children.

5) How can we expand this program statewide?

Stakeholders indicated that expansion may be difficult but also saw it as desirable. The most prominent suggestion was to have the FOCUS staff market the program statewide. They also offered to provide supportive references for the program to other jurisdictions.

6) How could the program be improved?

The primary improvement noted by the stakeholders was to offer the program earlier in the process. Have the men participate before they get thousands of dollars behind in child support. The program should also offer something for the mothers. More funding from the Office of the Attorney General was suggested to increase staffing and mentoring for the participants and to develop programs in other counties.

Overall, the instructors and community key stakeholders were very positive about the program. The program is viewed as a win-win for all involved. They see it as an asset to the court, probation department, state, participants and their children. They all strongly endorse the program and support its continuance and expansion. It should be noted that throughout all five interviews there was not one negative comment made regarding the program. That in itself speaks volumes about the success of the program and the strength of support of its key stakeholders.

**Focus groups with FOCUS participants.** Findings from the focus groups are reported in reference to each question asked of the participants.

1) What have you gained from your experience with the program?

Four major themes emerged in the discussions with the participants: 1) roles and responsibilities of being a father; 2) kids should come first; 3) I am not in this alone; and 4) control and attitude.

Roles and responsibilities of being a father

The participants related that they learned the do's and don'ts of being a father, how to look at things from the child's point of view, to be

more conscientious about their responsibilities, the meaning of being a dad, and identified their reasons for wanting to be a father.

#### Kids should come first

The participants related that the children are the most important, not their relationships with the mother of the children. They also indicated that they learned how to look at things from the child's point of view and that taking care of your kids is not all about paying money but that you must spend time with them also. Their interest in seeing their kids increased and they learned how to reconnect with their children and establish healthy relationships with them.

#### I am not alone in this

Many of the participants mentioned the value of hearing of others' situations. It made them feel that their own situation wasn't always helpless and that others often had it worse than they did. The suggestions made by the instructors and the other participants on how to deal with their situations were encouraging and validated their feelings of frustration and dismay. They had a sense of hope by the time they completed the program.

#### Control and attitude

A predominant aspect of the men's view of the program is their acceptance that they can only control themselves, not the mother of their children, their children, or the courts. This aspect played heavily in their discussions regarding their attitudes and subsequent actions. They expressed how they needed to stay positive and take responsibility for their actions. They discussed how they needed to let things go that they had no control over especially in their relationship with the mother of their children.

Although the vast majority of the participants indicated they had gained a great deal from the program, a few did not have the same experience. They felt they already were well versed in parenting and did not gain much and it was a waste of their time. It should be noted that these few participants came into the program exhibiting their anger for having to be there and continued to do so during the exit interview.

2) What 3 things did you learn from participating in the classes?

The participants identified 3 major learning experiences: 1) control; 2) focus on the child; and 3) the importance of having a better relationship with the mother of the child.

Control

The overarching theme of what was learned in the classes was control. The participants expressed they had learned how to control their feelings and attitude; that they can only control themselves; and that if under control the situation is much more manageable.

Focus on the child

Many of the participants discussed how they need to spend more time with their kids, making that time more worthwhile, and not taking their time with their children for granted. They want to be a better role model for their children and have more influence in their children's lives.

Relationship with the mother of the child

For many of the participants their relationship with the mother of their child is fraught with hostility, anger, and negative feelings. For others they have merged a working relationship for the benefit of their children. All of them expressed the value of having a better relationship with the mother of the child. They have learned how important that relationship is to their children and that it is not all about money. It is about the kids and that they need their father in their lives and will depend on their relationship with the mothers of the children.

The learning experience for the participants centered on their relationships with their children and the mothers of their children. Infused throughout the discussion was the need to be in control of their negative feelings and to understand that they cannot control others.

3) What 3 things would you do differently with your children now?

The participants identified several things they would do differently with their children based on their experience with the program. The primary change would be in how they interacted with their children. They would spend more time

with their children and during their time would make an effort to be more tolerant, listen to the children's concerns, participate in activities with them instead of just watching TV, establish open communication with the child, meet their responsibilities regarding visitation, and show love and affection toward their children. Additionally, they discussed the need to refrain from making disparaging comments about the mother of their children and try to establish a good relationship with the mother of the child. Some of the participants indicated there would be little change as they do not have a relationship with their children and do not see them. In some situations the children lived in another state and for others they showed little to no interest in establishing a relationship.

Overall, the participants identified many ways to enhance their relationships with their children and appeared to be willing to follow through with doing so. The need to focus on the children was paramount and they expressed that the building of a more positive relationship with the children's mother was essential to building a better relationship with the child.

4) What have you gained from being in an all male group?

The participants identified three major experiences of being in an all male group: 1) the ability to be open in their discussions; 2) the sharing of similar situations; and 3) respect from the facilitators.

The ability to be open in their discussions

For many participants the program was the first time they had experienced a group type setting. They found it much easier to discuss the issues with other men, and expressed their belief that if women had been in the group they would not have participated as openly. They indicated they had made some new friends through the program and the other participants provided useful information and help. They had camaraderie with one another that they did not have outside the group.

The sharing of similar situations

The issue of others being in the same situation was seen as helpful and comforting. They could identify with each others struggles in maintaining a relationship with their children. The participants were viewed as helpful to each other especially since they were going through similar problems.

### Respect from the facilitators

Several of the participants expressed their appreciation for the openness and nonjudgmental attitude of the group facilitators. They felt that the staff cared about their situations and truly wanted to help.

Overall, the participants felt that an all male group was preferable to a mixed group. A few men suggested that the women should be included in some of the discussions but all indicated that many of men would not be as open if women were present. They enjoyed the bonding with other men who had similar situations. The participants were very appreciative of acceptance they felt from the staff. As one participant stated: "I was afraid that on the first night I would have to stand up and state my name is John and I am a deadbeat dad. Thankfully it wasn't like that at all."

#### 5) What would you suggest to improve the classes?

The participants had several suggestions for improvements for the program. They centered on the structure of the program, additional services, and a program for mothers of children.

### Structure of the program

As with any program there was a call for less paperwork. They had mixed suggestions regarding the length of the program, some thought it was too short and others thought it too long. Several felt that there should be more options for days and times of the classes.

The content of the curriculum was viewed as good but somewhat basic. Many of the participants felt they already knew much of the information. Additionally, the participants expressed an interest in having mixed seating so they could have an opportunity to meet more of the men. They also suggested that each individual should have the opportunity to share their story.

### Additional services

Several participants expressed an interest in employment services, counseling, and case management services with the DA's office, workforce center and the public attorney. Most of the interest centered on assistance in finding employment. A job fair was suggested as well as

having more connections with court and attorneys. In essence the participants felt they were not accessing the services they needed and wanted assistance in doing so. Throughout the discussion statements regarding their negative relationships with the courts were voiced and suggestions for having the judges and attorneys invited to a session for questions and answers were made. A few participants expressed the need for counseling services due to the problems they were having with their children and issues with their situation. It was suggested that counseling be made available for those who needed it.

#### Program for mothers of the children

Almost all of the participants stated the need for a similar program for the mothers of their children. Some came from the position that if they had to participate then the mothers should also have to participate. Others indicated they thought the mothers would gain a better understanding of what the men were going through if they had a similar class. A few expressed the idea that some of the older children should come to a session also to get a better understanding of the issues.

Although there were several suggestions made to improve the classes, overall the participants found the material useful and felt the program was beneficial. They felt they were accepted as worthwhile human beings by the staff which was highly appreciated as they do not feel they are treated fairly or appropriately by the courts, probation, or attorneys. Some had issues about the need to share personal information especially early on in the program but the majority of participants indicated they were able to do so without concern. The idea that a program be available to mothers of the children was indicated by both the participants and the key stakeholders.

In summary, FOCUS stakeholders saw the program as an asset to the court, probation department, state, participants and their children. They all endorsed the program and supported its expansion on a state and national level. FOCUS participants felt that they were more conscientious about their responsibilities of being a father, and, based on what they learned from the program, they planned to become more involved in their child's life and refrain from making disparaging comments about the mother of their child.

## **Limitations**

The findings should be interpreted within the context of the study's limitations. The most noticeable limitation with the quantitative data were that an experimental research design was not used, which would have provided maximum control for the threats to internal and external validity. The findings from this study, therefore, are not meant to be generalized beyond the research sample and causation cannot be assumed, as the changes that FOCUS participants reported in their attitudes toward their role and responsibility as a father and their relationship with their child's mother may have been explained by factors not explored in this study. The methods used for this study were at particular risk for the internal validity threats of experimental mortality and testing. It would be beneficial if future research utilized an experimental research design to further test the effectiveness of programs similar to FOCUS. For the qualitative data, the findings may have been impacted by social desirability bias, or the likelihood that participants answered questions in a favorable manner because they did not want to articulate negative views of the FOCUS program, perhaps because they were current participants in the program at the time of the focus groups. Future research could use individual interviews to collect data on participants' views, and perhaps individual interviews may reduce social desirability bias, simply because other participants would not be present during the data collection, as they are in focus groups.

## **Discussion**

This study adds to the preliminary knowledge base on the effectiveness of diversion programs, such as FOCUS, for fathers who are noncompliant with child support payments. Findings suggest that FOCUS is benefiting children increasing their fathers' emotional support, strengthening co-parenting relationships, and promoting their fathers' parenting skills. A discussion of the findings is presented in reference to each research question.

### **Research Question 1: Does Participation in the FOCUS Program Benefit Children by Increasing their Fathers' Emotional Support?**

The participants were able to learn the importance of spending quality time with their children. The benefits of spending more time with their children, as explained by the participants during the exit interviews, include having an opportunity to be a role model in their children's lives, the opportunity to influence their children's lives, and the opportunity to meet their children's emotional needs through open communication. During the program, many of the

participants experienced an increase in the time they spent with their children. It is plausible to think that the men chose to spend more time with their children because they were able to internalize key concepts from the program, such as learning about their role as a father and the importance of interacting with their children. Based on previous research, the increased time that the fathers spent with their children may result in increased compliance with future child support payments (Arditti & Keith, 1993; Dudley, 1991, Sonenstein & Calhoun, 1990; Walker, Reid, & Logan, 2010; Wright & Price, 1986). Additionally, the participants verbalized an understanding that paying child support was not just about the money; child support is a responsibility that benefits the child. This enhanced understanding of the emotional and financial needs of their children may also be another factor that contributes towards the participants' future compliance with child support payments. Based on the data retrieved from the program evaluation, the FOCUS program is successful in meeting goal 1. The successes seen in meeting this goal are aligned with the programs value that the men care about their children and want to be the best dads they can be.

### **Research Question 2: Does Participation in the FOCUS Program Strengthen Co-parenting Relationships?**

The FOCUS programs curriculum emphasizes the importance of having a healthy, productive co-parenting relationship. The findings from the qualitative data indicate that the participants learned about the importance of improving their relationship with their child's mother, and a theme drawn from this data was that the men were motivated to make their co-parenting relationship more positive. The qualitative findings are promising, especially because Coley and Hernandez (2006) have provided evidence to suggest that positive mother-father relationships increases the likelihood of fathers having more frequent contact with their children. While the level of conflict with their child's mother decreased only slightly from pre to posttest, it is promising to see a decrease and it is suspected that the level of conflict will continue to decrease as the men continue to use the skills learned in the program.

While some of the participants verbalized negative feelings towards their child's mother, these men also discussed that the negative feelings have been subsiding and they have learned how to process the feelings in a healthier manner. The program assisted the men in changing behaviors that resulted in conflict with their child's mother, as evidenced by many men reporting that they are working towards the goal of not talking negatively about their child's mother, especially around their child. The participants experienced a statistically significant improvement in how they view their child's relationship to his or her mother.

Based on the data retrieved from the program evaluation, the FOCUS program is successful in meeting goal 2. The successes seen in meeting this goal are aligned with the programs values. Specifically, the participants learned the value of having both parents in their child's life, the importance of working in partnership with their child's mother, and the benefits of exposing their child to the different parenting styles that mothers and fathers have.

### **Research Question 3: Does Participation in the FOCUS Program Promote Fathers' Parenting Skills?**

The FOCUS program is successful in promoting the participants parenting skills. The majority of participants expressed that they felt comfortable in the program and that the program instructors provided a safe, nonjudgmental environment for them to share their experiences. The participants began the program knowing their strengths as a father and this knowledge of strengths was maintained throughout the 10 week program. As supported by the literature, Walker, Reid, and Logan (2010) also found that fathers knew their strengths as a father, with the major strength being in relationship-strengthening activities, such as spending time with their children and doing activities that make their children happy. In this study, the men saw the program as a resource for them to not necessarily learn new parenting skills, but to enhance the parenting skills they already have. Additionally, the participants felt that the program had a significant impact on the influence they have in their child's life, feeling more connected to their child, and experiencing a more positive relationship with their child. Based on the data retrieved from the program evaluation, the FOCUS program is successful in meeting goal 3. The successes seen in meeting this goal are aligned with the programs value that it is never too late to develop a relationship with your children.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the data gathered from this program evaluation, the FOCUS program is effective at meeting its goals. It appears that there are three major factors that contribute to the success of the program. First, the programs curriculum seems to be well received by the participants. The programs curriculum is driven by motivating and strengths-based techniques and it is suspected that this approach is more effective than a confrontational approach. Second, overall the participants felt that the programs instructors provided an environment where they felt comfortable to discuss the many sensitive thoughts and feelings they had related to their current life situations. Third, the participants found camaraderie with the other men. As reflected in the qualitative data, the

participants appreciated being in an all male group because they could identify with and support each other. Actually, the men shared that they would have liked to mix-up the seating at each class so they could meet more of the participants and further enhance the camaraderie. In conclusion, the FOCUS program appears to be beneficial to the many parties involved and this effectiveness, in combination with the support from the community key stakeholders, will surely be a useful tool in the expansion of similar programs on a state and national level.

Appendix A  
Telephone Interview Questions

- 1) How is the program an asset to your work?
- 2) Why do you participate?
- 3) What changes do you see with the participants?
- 4) Why do you support the program?
- 5) How can we expand this program statewide?
- 6) How could the program be improved?

Appendix B  
Focus Group Questions

- 1) What have you gained from your experience with the program?
- 2) What three things did you learn from participating in the classes?
- 3) What three things would you do differently with your children now?
- 4) What have you gained from being in an all male group in the past ten weeks?
- 5) What would you suggest to improve the classes?

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