FATHERS' VIEWS OF CO-PARENTING RELATIONSHIPS: **FINDINGS FROM THE PACT EVALUATION**

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A key goal of Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programs is to improve fathers' co-parenting relationships with the mothers of their children and thereby strengthen fathers' involvement with their children as responsible parents. The relative degree of conflict and cooperation in co-parenting relationships has important consequences for father involvement, especially for fathers who do not live with their children (Sobolewski and King 2005; Carlson et al. 2008; Edin and Nelson 2013, Wood and Covington 2014), and it ultimately has important consequences for children's well-being (Marsiglio et al. 2000; Stewart 2003; Adamsons and Johnson 2013). Earlier research has often focused on co-parenting relationships between divorced parents, but a growing body of research points to the importance of understanding the co-parenting relationships of unmarried parents.

The Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation provides an opportunity to explore the nature of low-income fathers' co-parenting relationships with the mothers of their children. This multi-year evaluation is measuring the impacts and implementation of four RF programs that received three-year grants in 2011. The grants ended in 2015 after a one-year extension. These Responsible Fatherhood programs are funded and overseen by

the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (Box 1). As part of the PACT evaluation's qualitative study, we conducted two rounds of in-depth, in-person interviews with 87 fathers, a subset of those who had enrolled in the RF programs (Box 2). During these interviews, fathers described the history and dynamics of their relationships with the mothers of their children, the effect they thought those relationships had on their involvement with their children, and their views of the state of their current interactions with the mothers of their children.

Instability and conflict frequently characterized the early stages of these fathers' relationships with the mothers of their children, according to participants in the first round of in-depth interviews. Although some fathers and mothers, whose romantic relationships ended, found ways to maintain positive co-parenting relationships, many did not. Instead, the dissolution of these relationships was often marked by tension and acrimony, which undermined the parents' ability to engage in positive co-parenting. The fathers we spoke to frequently reported being frustrated by maternal "gatekeeping"—the mothers' efforts to limit fathers' access to their children (Holcomb et al. 2015).

Box 1. The Parents and Children Together (PACT) Evaluation

The Parents and Children Together (PACT) evaluation is a large-scale multi-component project intended to broaden our understanding of Responsible Fatherhood (RF) and Healthy Marriage (HM) programs. The major components are:

- Implementation study of four RF and two HM programs
- Impacts study of four RF and two HM programs
- Qualitative study of fathers in four RF programs
- Descriptive study of RF programs serving Hispanic populations

To understand RF programs and the fathers who participate in them, the PACT evaluation addresses research questions from several angles, using a mixed-methods approach. The implementation study documents how RF programs are designed and operated and identifies challenges and promising practices. The impact study measures the effects of RF programs on fathers' engagement with their children, their employment and economic self-sufficiency, family functioning, and co-parenting and romantic relationships. The qualitative study focuses on three rounds of in-depth, in-person interviews, conducted annually to shed light on the lives of RF program participants. This brief is based on data collected in the qualitative study.

The fathers in the qualitative study were enrolled in RF programs at: (1) Successful STEPS, at Connections to Success (Kansas City, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri); (2) the Family Formation Program, at Fathers' Support Center St. Louis (St. Louis, Missouri); (3) the FATHER Project, at Goodwill-Easter Seals Minnesota (Minneapolis, Minnesota, and St. Paul, Minnesota); and (4) the Center for Fathering, at Urban Ventures (Minneapolis, Minnesota).

The RF programs in PACT take one of two approaches to service delivery: (1) an integrated cohort approach that provides blended services to groups of fathers who proceed through the program together on an intensive schedule, or (2) an open-entry workshop approach that allows fathers to start at any time and take advantage of a menu of lower-intensity services. Regardless of the format, the parenting and relationship components are delivered in a group setting, where men can give each other peer support and develop friendships based on shared experiences. A detailed description of these four programs is available in a report on the implementation of RF programs in PACT (Zaveri et al. 2015).

In this brief, we use data from the second round of in-depth interviews with 59 PACT fathers to focus on three topics: (1) the nature of fathers' *co-parenting relationships*—the ways that fathers and mothers interact and work together in their role as parents (Feinberg 2003)—at the time of our second round of interviews, (2) changes in these co-parenting relationships that had taken place in the year between the first and second interviews, and (3) efforts made by fathers over the same period to obtain formal agreements for visitation, custody, or parenting time. We conclude with a summary of key findings and implications for the design of RF programs as they continue to evolve.

Box 2. PACT qualitative study design and methods

The PACT qualitative study focuses on the views and experiences of a subset of fathers who voluntarily enrolled in one of the Responsible Fatherhood programs participating in PACT. A subset of fathers participating in each of the programs was selected and invited to take part in an in-depth interview in 2013. Two additional rounds of in-depth interviews were conducted annually thereafter, drawing on the same subset of fathers.

Each in-depth interview lasted 1.5 to 2 hours and was conducted in person by a qualitative researcher who was trained to take a conversational approach and encourage fathers to convey their views and experiences in their own words. To ensure that all fathers had the opportunity to discuss their thoughts and feelings about the same areas, researchers were guided by a previously-developed set of topics. For example, the round 1 topics focused on fathers' childhoods, relationships with their children and the mothers of their children, views on fathering, employment experiences, and participation in the fatherhood programs. To build and enhance rapport, we matched each father in subsequent rounds with the same interviewer who conducted the round 1 interview whenever possible. After each round of interviews, the conversations were transcribed and researchers coded their content to create a database of fathers' experiences and views. The resulting databases allow the research team to systematically analyze topics of interest and identify key themes.

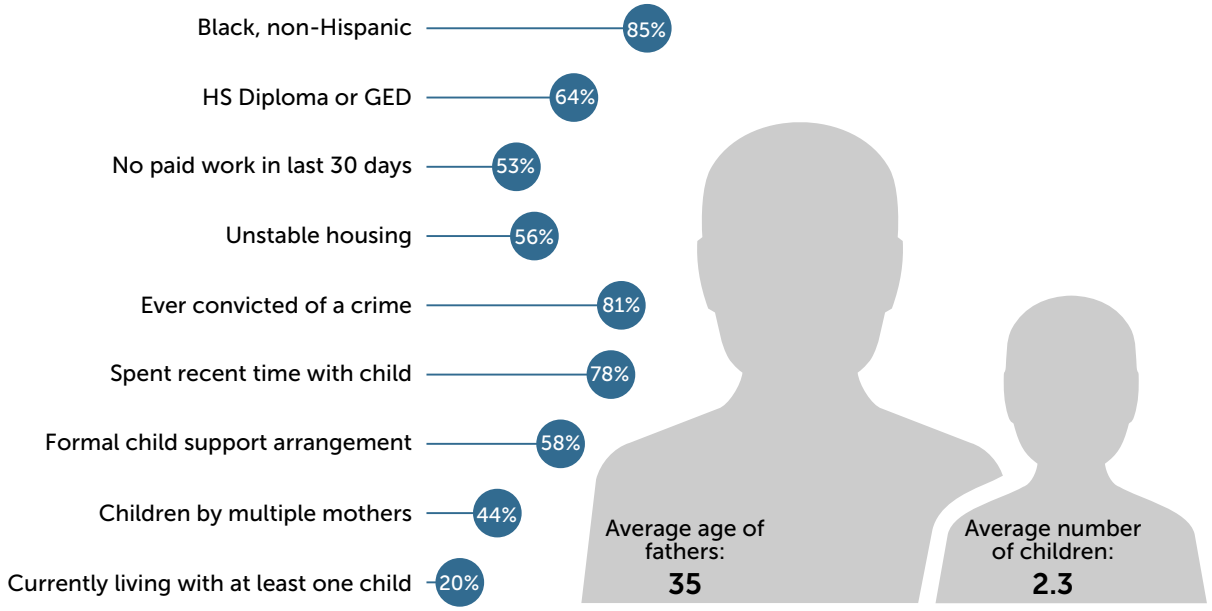
This brief describes themes that emerged on the topic of fathers' relationships with the mothers of their children, based on the first two rounds of interviews with fathers. In the first round of interviews in 2013, 87 low-income, predominantly African American fathers participated. In the second round in 2014, we attempted to reach all 87 fathers again, ultimately reaching and interviewing 59 of them. Although we could not interview all of the original 87 fathers, we found that the background characteristics of the 59 fathers in round 2 were similar to those of the full sample of fathers interviewed in round 1 (see Figure 1). The second round of interviews built on what was learned in the first round with respect to the origins of fathers' relationships with the mothers of their children, relationship dissolution, the current quality of these relationships, and their efforts to co-parent. The second round of interviews updated these earlier reports and collected more detail about the nature of fathers' co-parenting relationships. Among other topics, researchers explored how fathers work together with the mothers as parents, their approach to discipline, and their involvement with their children.

For more information about how fathers were selected for round 1 and the interviewing and coding methodology used in all rounds of the PACT Qualitative study, see Holcomb et al. 2015.

BACKGROUND CHARACTERISTICS OF FATHERS IN THE PACT QUALITATIVE STUDY

According to a structured survey administered at the time of program enrollment, the majority of fathers interviewed in the qualitative study were non-resident, low-income African American fathers with high rates of economic instability and chronic unemployment. These fathers typically face an array of challenges (Figure 1), including low levels of education, employment, and earnings, as well as past involvement in the criminal justice system (Holcomb et al. 2015). At enrollment, 44 percent had children by multiple mothers, and 58 percent of the fathers had a formal child support order. Figure 1 describes several of these characteristics. These characteristics measured at enrollment form a backdrop for the discussion of findings from the second wave of qualitative in-depth interviews conducted about two years later.

Figure 1. **Characteristics of fathers who participated in round two in-depth interview**



Source: PACT baseline survey.
Note: The characteristics of the 59 fathers that participated in the second round of in-depth interviews were similar to those of the 87 fathers who participated in the first round. For round two, there were no significant differences between those who participated in the round two interviews and those who were eligible but did not participate.

COOPERATIVE, CONFLICTED, AND DISENGAGED CO-PARENTING BEHAVIOR

We use a three-part typology originally developed by Maccoby and Mnookin (1992) to characterize fathers' co-parenting relationships:

- **Cooperative relationships** have high levels of cooperation and low levels of conflict.
- **Conflicted relationships** have high levels of conflict and low levels of cooperation.
- **Disengaged relationships** have low levels of cooperation and low levels of conflict.

This typology has subsequently been applied to samples of low-income couples and fathers in RF programs. Waller (2012) applied the typology to unmarried, low-income couples with a new child in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, and found that cooperative relationships (in contrast with conflicted or disengaged relationships) were associated with greater involvement of fathers in their children's lives. Other researchers used the typology in an examination of co-parenting dynamics in a sample of low-income fathers who enrolled in Responsible Fatherhood (RF) programs and fathers who had not (Levine et al. 2015). We applied this same typology to our sample of low-income, mostly nonresidential, fathers participating in a RF program.

The descriptions of co-parenting presented here are based solely on fathers' accounts. There are always two sides (at least) to any story, and without the benefit of interviewing the mothers, we are by definition presenting an incomplete and one-sided picture. With that caveat in mind, the intent of the PACT qualitative study is to provide a faithful rendering of how fathers understand and perceive their world, including how they think the mothers of their children shape the nature and extent of their involvement with their children.

Box 3. Categorizing fathers' co-parenting relationships

We describe fathers' co-parenting relationships using a typology originally developed for divorced parents (Maccoby and Mnookin 1998), but more recently applied to co-parenting relationships of unmarried parents (Carlson et al. 2008; Waller 2012) and fathers enrolled in Responsible Fatherhood programs (Sobolewski and King 2005; Levine et al. 2015). While our approach to categorizing fathers' co-parenting relationships is guided by these previous studies, our analysis differs from them because we use data from in-depth qualitative interviews rather than close-ended surveys. To group fathers' co-parenting relationships into the three categories, we looked at fathers' interview transcripts primarily to identify indicators of cooperation and conflict as defined by Waller (2012) and applied by Levine et al. (2015):

- **Cooperative.** Relationships were classified as cooperative if the father described more indicators of cooperation than conflict. Indicators of cooperation included the degree to which a father collaborated with the mother, felt supported by the mother, and had similar goals and beliefs concerning child. We also considered fathers' own assessments of the quality of their co-parenting relationship with the mother in deciding whether to classify the relationship as cooperative or conflicted.
- **Conflicted.** Relationships were classified as conflicted if the father described more indicators of conflict than cooperation. Indicators of conflict included fathers' descriptions of the mother actively attempting to interfere with the father's relationship with their child, denying fathers' access to their child, and other types of verbal disputes and physical violence between the parents. If a father had minimal communication with the mother but all of that communication was conflicted, we categorized the father as having a conflicted co-parenting relationship.
- **Disengaged.** Fathers who had minimal levels of cooperation and conflict were categorized as having disengaged co-parenting relationships. This included fathers who had no contact with the mother of their children (for example, mothers who moved away without providing contact information), as well as fathers who had little to no communication with the mothers (for example, fathers who knew where the mother was, but lived far away or were not actively involved in parenting the child with the mother).

Cooperative co-parenting relationships: When fathers and mothers communicate, reach compromises, and work together

About one-third of the fathers in the second round of qualitative interviews (n=18) had a cooperative co-parenting relationship with at least one of their children's mothers. Just over half of these (n=10) were non-resident fathers who had frequent contact with their children (that is, at least once a week). The rest (n=8) were resident fathers, including a few who were married to the mother of at least one of their children.

In these cooperative co-parenting relationships, the two parents communicated with each other about parenting issues. Fathers with cooperative relationships said they talked with their children's mothers when they had parenting disagreements. For example, James, a 51-year-old father of two, expressed frustration that his daughter's mother sometimes paid more attention to her cellphone than to their daughter.[1] He talked to the mother about his concern because "if there is an issue, we try to bring it to the forefront before it boils and becomes a bigger issue," adding that "if we don't bring it up, that means we got a problem…that means we're failing to communicate."

We've really come together and got in tune with each other to get a uniform approach.
—Maurice

Fathers in cooperative co-parenting relationships also emphasized the importance of reaching agreement. Maurice, a 50-year-old married father of one, and his wife worked out a consistent approach to address their 5-year-old son's attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD):

> So we've come together on aspects of dealing with his ADHD. More practice, more homework, better discipline, free time, rewards come later and we've implemented the stars where he puts stars on the piece of paper in his room, sticker stars, for the good things that he does…So we've done very well there. We've really come together and got in tune with each other to get a uniform approach.

Taylor, a 39-year-old father of seven, talked to his daughter's mother about the importance of reaching agreement on a consistent approach to discipline:

[1] In this brief, all fathers' names were changed to protect their identities.

> I sat her [the child's mother] down and explained to her, "You're confusing her [his daughter]. We don't want to confuse her, let's come to terms on what's right and if one of us is doing something wrong, then we just change it."

Getting "in tune" with the mothers often required compromise and a willingness to find common ground. Vincent, a 24-year-old father of one, who lives with his child and the child's mother, described how finding an agreeable compromise was ultimately in the best interest of his son:

> We disagree on...what's the best thing for him...she thinks one way and I think another. But we always try to meet each other in the middle about that, even if my way may be wrong or her way may be wrong. We try to come up with the best solution for him. We can't make it about us.

Similarly, Amos, a 35-year-old father of one, who lives with his son, disagreed with the mother about which school their son should attend: "She [doesn't] want him to go to North High next year, but I told her, 'Let him go this one year…because they are bringing back the summer tech program.'" According to Amos, the mother ultimately agreed because "she know I [would not] put my son in any predicament that [isn't] good for him."

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> Yeah, I like the way she does. She's a good mother... [She] is the same every day. [She] is the type of mother who [will say], "Get your homework done. Take those school clothes off. Clean the kitchen up. Don't leave that stuff on the floor." She's been that way since he was born. To where now, she doesn't have to tell him anymore.

Conflicted co-parenting relationships: Conflicts over parenting styles, financial support, and access to children

About one-third of the fathers we interviewed (n=22) had conflicted co-parenting relationships that were marked by verbal disagreements and diverging views on a variety of issues. The most common areas of conflict were over differing styles of parenting, particularly related to discipline, financial support, and the amount of access fathers had to their children.

Differences over how to parent their children. In contrast with fathers in cooperative co-parenting relationships, fathers in conflicted co-parenting relationships often disagreed with their children's mothers about their philosophy or approach to parenting. For example, Xavier, a 27-year-old father of three, who often "bumps heads" with the mother of his daughter, described what happened when he wanted his daughter to work for the money to cover the cost of an after-school basketball activity:

> I'm trying to show her a work ethic... I wanted...her to basically work for the money that she needed for the basketball...and she just—her mother felt like, "Hey, just give it to her, why do you have to make her work for it? You [are] her father."

In general, Xavier thinks his child's mother is too permissive and lets his daughter "do what she want[s] to do" whereas he says the mother believes "that I was being mean or I was being too bossy."

Fathers and mothers were also at odds over how closely children should adhere to daily routines set by the custodial parent. For example, Martin, a 22-year-old father of one, has a daughter who stays with him on weekends. He and the mother often disagree about how closely he should follow the daily routines that she has established (for example, eating breakfast at a certain time or taking a bath in the evening). Martin believes that "as long as I'm going to be taking good care of her, it shouldn't really matter."

Fathers in conflicted co-parenting relationships often disagreed with mothers about their approach to discipline. Keshawn, a 39-year-old father of five, reported that he and his child's mother "totally have a different approach as far as discipline." When his son gets in trouble at school or does not complete his chores, Keshawn said his approach is to "take things from him or have him stay in his room," whereas the mother would not apply any consequences. He felt that his son would "take advantage" of the mother as a result.

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Some of these fathers felt that the mothers wanted full control over parenting decisions or were unwilling to compromise. Blaine, a 30-year-old father of two, has difficulty even talking with his children's mother about parenting because "she thinks she knows it all," and "she wants to play the mom and the dad." When he tries to give advice or suggest a solution, he says, "She'll make a debate or an argument about it and try to get the last word." He added, "I don't have time to be arguing…if we're trying to raise our children."

Rashaad, a 28-year-old father of four with an on-again, off-again romantic relationship with the mother of one of his children, says that she undermines his role as a father, which makes him feel powerless:

> We don't necessarily (work together). I've backed off. I don't feel any power over my kids honestly… I'll say things, and their mom will step on my toes in front of them…when I say something, she shouldn't reprimand me in front of the kids. I guess at that point I'd rather not say anything…so I leave it alone.

Tension over financial support for the children. Some fathers (n=11) described how their communication with mothers focused on disagreements or on mothers' complaints about financial support for the children. Byron, a 26-year-old father of one, believes his son's mother only calls him to ask about money, and this always results in conflict:

> A majority of the times she's asking me for something. Some money or something like that, and its like, why should I give you some money? You don't do anything for my son. I buy everything for him still.

Quincy, a 36-year-old with four children, reported that the mother of one of his children would verbally assault him if he did not give her more money. He shared this story:

> She wilds out every now and again, you know what I'm saying? And now we are at a wild-out point. She, about a month ago, she wanted $100, $150. I gave her $100, that's all I could afford. [She responded,] "I need the other $100, you don't do [anything], you deadbeat dad."

Levi, a 40-year-old father of three, told a similar story. Levi thinks the mother of one of his children criticizes him for not seeing or taking care of their child, but only calls him when she wants to demand more financial support. He described a recent interaction with her:

> She complains to me about not taking care of him, not seeing him, [not] taking care of him. So when she calls me or texts me, she only asks me about money, not if he can come over or anything... Shoot, I told her I'll help her pay her car bill, and she thought I said [I would cover] the whole thing [bill], and I didn't give her the money and she just completely flipped out. Just [went] crazy. Cursed me out and everything. Sent me bad text messages and all...when she does talk to me, it's only about money.

Nearly one-third of the fathers in conflicted co-parenting relationships were unable to maintain an open line of communication with their children's mothers. A handful of father limited communications with their children's mothers in an effort to reduce conflict.

Frustration over lack of access to children. Most fathers in conflicted co-parenting relationships (n=20) struggled to establish or maintain contact with their children. Rashaad described how his daughter's mother controlled his ability to spend time with his daughter:

> She [the mother] has the power. The power is given to her, so I stopped caring actually. I stopped crying. She says things like "She don't even like you no more. She don't want to see you no more." I hadn't talked to her. I'd call her every other day and be like, "Can I talk to Tania?" "She's gone," or "She's at her auntie house." Or "She's outside," or "She's in the bathtub." It was always an excuse every time I called as to why I couldn't talk to her. We start arguing... I do as much as I can.

Similarly, for Kemal, a 29-year-old father of one, the mother of his daughter made it difficult for him to even call his daughter:

> [I] can't really talk to her [daughter] on the phone. She's got to sneak on the phone to call me and hang up real fast if somebody comes in...and if she's caught texting me she gets in trouble. It's just–it's weird you know, like what my child's going through...you want to make it better, but it takes cooperation with a whole other supposedly adult and it's hard.

Nearly one-third of the fathers in conflicted co-parenting relationships (n=7) were unable to maintain an open line of communication with their children's mothers. In this respect, these relationships resemble disengaged co-parenting (discussed next), but differ in that they still involve conflicted communication. Some fathers described how the mothers of their children ignored their calls ("She doesn't pick up the phone") or told us they ignored calls from the mothers; some reported that negative interactions prevented any communication from taking place ("She's bitter, there's no talking to her"). For example, Byron, described his unsuccessful attempts to communicate with the mother of his son:

> Oh my god, I tried it all. I tried talking to her. I tried being more...like buddies with her. That didn't work. I tried it all. I mean, I tried [telling her] to just call me if it's about [my son], nothing else. That didn't work. I tried to even go through my mom. I tried to not talk to her and have my mom get little [my son], and drop [my son], and do it like that. She'll stop answering the phone for my mom...and she'll stop answering the phone, and just doing all types of dumb stuff making it harder for me.

In a handful of cases, fathers with conflicted co-parenting relationships limited their communications with their children's mothers in an effort to reduce conflict. In these relationships, fathers reported parenting on their own and differently from the mother, a situation we refer to as "siloed parenting." For example, Marquis, a 28-year-old father or one, talked about his isolation as a parent as a result of the conflict with the mother:

> I have said to her, we are a team and she told me, no, we're not. So...I'm just a single dad but I do have another parent to help me but we don't work together as a team... It sucks but you know, I have been through so much in life, it's at that point where even if the worse stuff happens, it doesn't affect me... I'm kind of numb... there's only so much we can say to each other, because she doesn't trust me and I don't trust her.

Disengaged parenting was marked by low levels of cooperation and conflict among fathers and mothers, often because there was little or no communication between the parents.

Another father, Amos, explained that in order to avoid conflict he only talks to the mother of his son about the essentials. He gave this example:

> We're just parents, I don't talk to her unless it has something to do with my son... He's going to get sick, he just had ringworm, so I had to take him to the doctor, he had to take certain medicine that he's still got to take, but otherwise, like I said, I don't talk to her [about parenting].

Disengaged co-parenting relationships: Little to no communication with the mothers

About 40 percent of the fathers we interviewed (n=24) had disengaged co-parenting relationships with their children's mothers. These relationships were marked by low levels of cooperation and conflict among fathers and mothers, often because there was little or no communication between the parents. For example, D'Angelo, a 38-year-old father of two, described how he sends messages to the mother through their son:

She'll do it on her end, I'll do it on my end… We don't do it together… It's really not a lot of co-parenting at all.
—Cedric

> Well, when I call her, she has seen my number programmed in her phone, and my son usually answer[s] the phone. That's how we do it. I don't talk to her. And if I do [need to tell her] something, [I say to my son,] "tell your mom I got this money…" So. I just, you know, tell him what I need to tell him, and let him know that his dad is there for him, trying to be there for him.

Blaine says "If I call [the children's mother] I say, "May I speak to my kids or speak to my boys?" That's just about it. I don't engage in…conversation, nothing with her whatsoever."

Siloed parenting was also common in these fathers' co-parenting relationships. Jair, a 38-year-old father of four who has frequent contact with his son, explained how he and his son's mother respond to issues that arise, "She'll do it on her end, I'll do it on my end… We don't do it together." Cedric, 31-year-old father of three, had a similar situation, describing his relationship, "It's really not a lot of co-parenting at all. That's something that I really would love to improve." He explained:

> Unfortunately, we don't have that co-parenting system. It's like deal with it her way, and she may tell me about it. She expect[s] for me to deal with it in my way when I get them. If they did something bad, I have to wait until it's my turn to get them to implement or discipline the things that happened. There's no togetherness on what we do. No solutions.

Just under half of the fathers in disengaged co-parenting relationships still managed to have frequent contact with their children. A few fathers lived in different cities or states, but maintained regular contact with their children by phone or through social media. For example, Preston, a 32-year-old father of four, had not talked to his children's mother or seen several of his children in months because they lived in another state: "I [haven't] seen them, because they moved to Houston, Texas, this year. I see them on Facebook, and I talk to them on the phone. I'm going to go down there."

"Siloed parenting" was common among fathers in disengaged co-parenting relationships. In these relationships, fathers reported parenting on their own and differently from the mother.

In a few cases, fathers in disengaged co-parenting relationships lived with their children and it was the mothers who were absent and assumed a minimal parenting role. Kennedy, who has full custody of his only child, explained how the mother rarely communicates with their son. When Kennedy tries to talk with her about parenting issues, "she kind of just puts her hands up and says, 'Oh, you take care of it.'" He laments, "she could be closer with him, but you know that's on her." A mother's own challenges could limit the amount of co-parenting as well. Solomon, a 22-year-old single father with full custody of his daughter, explained that her mother struggles with drug addiction and has minimal contact with their daughter. As a result, the daughter doesn't really know her mother and she "don't call her mama…she calls her by her [first] name."

Just over half of fathers with disengaged co-parenting relationships (n=13) had little to no contact with their children. Many of these fathers had not had contact with the mothers of their children for at least a year. These fathers often described how mothers moved (often out of state) without leaving any contact information. All but a few of

these fathers were actively seeking to locate their children and gain access to them, but had difficulty tracking down the mothers and their children. This was the case for Isaac, a 29-year-old father of two who had been looking for the mother of one of his children for several years after she "disappeared." He recently found her and is now seeking a joint custody or visitation agreement.

"All of them are different." Fathers of children with different mothers often had to navigate the complexities of different relationships with each mother.

Forty-four percent of the fathers we interviewed (n=25) had children by more than one mother, and relationships with them often varied, according to the fathers. Some had only conflicted and disengaged co-parenting relationships, while others had a mix of positive and negative co-parenting relationships. Keshawn has five children from five different mothers. He described the mother of his one-year-old daughter as uncooperative, hostile, and demeaning, and was in the process of seeking a formal visitation agreement. He has ongoing disagreements with the grandmother who has custody of one teenage son, and he argues with the mother of his other teenage son because he views her as too lenient. He is fairly disengaged from the mother of two other children—they contact him directly when they need things and there is minimal co-parenting. Keshawn knows, "I should want to have a good relationship with all my kid's mothers," but he doesn't "like the arguments and unnecessary things."

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Preston, who has four children by four different women, described disengaged co-parenting relationships with three of the mothers, but a cooperative relationship with the fourth. He avoids communication with one mother whom he described as erratic, "She acting like the devil sometimes… My son got his own phone, so I call his phone … Half the time she don't want to answer her phone." But he describes his relationship with the mother of his two-year-old daughter as cooperative: "We got a pretty good relationship…no bad blood… It's all about communication basically and trying to find out the best thing for [daughter]." He explained that this relationship requires "Communicating, stay(ing) on the same page, and just try(ing) to get along. Just because we [are not] together don't mean we got to be feuding with each other."

CHANGES IN CO-PARENTING AND EFFORTS TO GAIN ACCESS TO CHILDREN

Because the majority of fathers had conflicted or disengaged co-parenting relationships, we examined whether the relationships had changed in the year between the first and second interviews. Information from the interviews helped us understand the extent to which co-parenting relationships were malleable and could change over time. We also took advantage of the longitudinal nature of the study to examine the round 2 status of fathers' efforts to seek formal joint custody or parenting time agreements, and their success in establishing these agreements.

Improvements in co-parenting relationships between the first and second round interviews

About one-quarter of the fathers experienced improvements in their co-parenting relationships over the year between interviews, including more communication, fewer arguments, and increased contact with their children. Some of these fathers experienced small but meaningful changes in their relationships with the mothers. For example, Isaac, a 29-year-old father of two, described how the mother had changed "a little bit, she was nicer…we [talk] over the phone, but it's just about my daughter, nothing more, nothing less." Other fathers experienced more substantial changes, although things rarely improved to the point of a cooperative relationship. Jair and the mother of his three children used to "fuss" with each other but their relationship has improved more recently: "It's been a while since we had a fuss…We don't do that no more… We did [stop arguing] for the sake of the kids. Yeah, ain't about us."

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The reasons for improvements in co-parenting relationships were often not clear to the fathers. In some cases, fathers described their efforts to be more involved or communicate better, while others, such as Jair, thought something about the mother had changed:

> Oh, she was off the chain, boy… I don't know what hit her though, now she's a totally different person…'cause all we did was fuss. Now, it's different now. She turned and did a [180].

For Vincent, a 24-year-old father of one, his relationship with the mother of his son became "a little better" after he developed a closer relationship with his son. But when asked what led to this change, he acknowledged, "I don't know. Maybe the time. The way she see[s] me and my son…bonding… She don't have to call me and ask me to come pick him up any more. We['ve] already got days set for that. So, that's probably what makes it better." Rashaad was also not sure why his child's mother had changed, but noted his own efforts to communicate with her more. He stated, "Hopefully, something really changed in Nellie… I'm trying to be more proactive and communicating with her."

Some fathers thought their relationship with the mothers improved as a result of initiating a legal action or threat of legal action regarding custody or visitation. This includes fathers who successfully gained custody. For example, Garrett, a 40-year-old father of one, recalled a significant change in his child's mother when the judge granted him supervised visitation after a long legal battle:

> So my ex-wife who hasn't been communicating with me all these years, suddenly as soon as he banged the gavel, she turned around, and now she's talking to me. And I was just flabbergasted. She hasn't talked to me. Only in

> court or through her lawyer. But suddenly, she was telling me her number. She's telling me what time she puts her to bed, what are good days to call, and I remember I was so stunned.

Obtaining joint custody or formal visitation agreements changed the co-parenting dynamic between fathers and mothers. Cedric described how his co-parenting relationship changed after he received joint custody because the mother "has to communicate, otherwise she's violating the custody agreement." He explained that, "Now she's more there for all of us, me and the kids. When they have to ask her something she's more open to picking up the phone and calling me." In his first interview, Kurtis, a 31-year-old father of one, described having limited access to his son because of the mother's gatekeeping activities; for example, she would not let his son spend time at his place. But during our follow-up interview a year later, Kurtis said he routinely spent time with his son on weekends. He thought his threat to seek formal visitation may have led to the change:

> Honestly I don't know. I know one day we [were] arguing and...I told her that I was fixing to go file...so I could get visitation rights... I don't know what changed in her mind, but ever since that day he's been coming over.

Fathers who experienced an improvement in their co-parenting relationship welcomed the positive change, but were uncertain about whether it would last and adopted a "time will tell" attitude. For example, Rashaad, who told us how his relationship with his children's mother had improved, also noted that "[She and I] are the best right now, but…no telling how long that's going to last. I don't like to get my hopes or wishes up. I live day by day and wait for somebody to flip the script."

Despite ongoing conflicts with mothers about access to their children, few fathers obtained legal joint custody or parenting time agreements between the first and second interviews.

Most nonresident fathers in the qualitative study, including those who had frequent contact with their children (n=17), lacked joint custody (n=48) or a legal parenting time (visitation) arrangement (n=45). Some viewed pursuit of such formal agreements as an option to be pursued only if their children's mothers restricted access. For example, Martin and his daughter's mother had worked out an informal arrangement

for him to have his daughter on weekends. He did not plan to seek a formal joint custody or parenting time agreement unless the mother began restricting access to his daughter, explaining:

> I thought about it. I mean, it depends on where we progress at getting along-wise when it comes to her. But if it comes to that point where I need to (obtain joint custody or visitation) then I would, but right now, I don't think I have to.

There were other reasons given for not pursuing a formal joint custody or parenting time agreement. Some fathers were not prepared to financially or socially support their children because of their own unemployment, economic hardship, or unstable housing. Some were concerned that their criminal record would prevent them from obtaining custody. When asked if he would pursue a formal custody or parenting time agreement, Sammy, a 28-year-old father of one, who is employed but has difficulty making ends meet, considered seeking joint custody of his children, but did not think he was financially prepared to pursue it. He explained: I want to first make sure everything is stable with the home front…as far as the job goes and…maintaining my home. Just making sure that I have all my eggs in the basket.

Some fathers had spent more than a year seeking a formal custody or parenting time agreement and attributed delays to having to locate the mother, resubmit incorrect paperwork, obtain enough money for a lawyer, or just work through the legal process.

Lamar, a 48-year-old father of two, believed his criminal record would prevent him from obtaining formal custody. He compared himself to the mother of his children and thought he had no chance of obtaining custody:

> And she has never even been to jail in her life, and she holds a job and I work temp jobs. A judge would look at her and look at me, and he would say, no way am I getting them. I pretty much gave up until they're 16, that is if they want to come with me.

In a similar vein, a few fathers (n=5) were "system-shy" as a result of their previous experience with the criminal justice system. As reflected in the following comment by Byron, these fathers did not want to seek formal visitation or custody because they view the system with suspicion and expect the courts to treat them unfairly:

> I don't like courts. I don't like police. I don't like judges. I don't like none of that… They're going to screw me, because that's what they're here for, to screw me anyway. There's nothing going to come from me going down there talk to them… I just know. It's just never nothing good.

One-quarter of the fathers we interviewed had sought a formal shared custody or parenting time agreement during the first and second interviews. Most described the process as long and difficult. Some had spent more than a year seeking a formal custody or parenting time agreement, and attributed delays to having to locate the mother, resubmit incorrect paperwork, obtain enough money for a lawyer, or just work through the legal process. Fewer than half succeeded in obtaining a formal agreement (including two who obtained sole custody after the child's mother or caretaker passed away) and some were continuing to work through the process.

> I can't afford a lawyer… I'm saying, $1400… I don't even have, you know, one-fourth of that.
> —Darnell

For example, Kemal, a 29-year-old father of one, expressed frustration with the court system for denying his petition to have the court fees associated with seeking visitation waived. He recounted: "I needed a waiver because I wasn't working then, and I didn't have the money to really pay for it to get filed again and she denied it just off the fact that I had a car note. So that was frustrating." He also had to start the process over after he submitted paperwork with the wrong address for his daughter's aunt. Quincy highlighted the challenge of paying for a lawyer: "I can't afford a lawyer… I'm saying, $1400… I don't even have, you know, one-fourth of that." Darnell, a 29-year-old father of two sons, spent over a year seeking joint custody; he had to locate the mother and work his case through the court system. He reflected, "It's a time [consuming] process, not cheap at all."

Some fathers attributed improved relationship or communication skills to the RF program.

Although the second interviews took place at least one year after the fathers had participated in the RF programs, almost one-quarter of fathers described how the RF programs had helped them, in small ways, to navigate their co-parenting relationships. These fathers, whose co-parenting relationships spanned the three types described here, often cited the importance of relationship or communication skills they gained from the program. Jason, a 24-year-old father of two, used techniques that he learned in the RF program to communicate with the mothers of his children. "We learned how to talk our difference away without arguing, [or] getting mad at each other." He also learned how to keep calm during these conversations:

> It showed me, okay. Just stop for a minute. Just think. You understand you get mad, stop and think. When you…get mad about…something she did or something she say, stop before you snap out and just think about it first and then find a way to reverse it…. Instead of a bad outcome, make it a good outcome.

These fathers described how they used skills they learned in the RF programs to improve communication with the mothers, such as how to manage conflicts or control one's anger. Isaac, a 29 year-old father of two described how the RF program improved his relationship with his daughter's mother:

> It helped me be a better male to the mother of my children—showed me how to get around when she trying to be nasty to me and how to be nice and be more polite to her. It definitely put me in a better situation. I'm getting to see my child more. I say that taught me…how to be a better man, how to be a better father; taught me how to be more reliant, how to be able to just take that negative energy and just push it back towards her with positive energy, and it worked out.

Almost one-quarter of fathers described how the RF programs had helped them, in small ways, to navigate their co-parenting relationships.

Kurtis described how his previously turbulent co-parenting relationship with the mother of his child had improved slightly over the year between the two interviews as the mother reduced her gatekeeping activities. He described how the RF program:

> …taught me arguing is never going to get you anywhere. You actually have to sit down and talk. If she wants to argue, just tell her you'll call her back once she's more calm and in a better mood…certain things that they [RF program] taught me that actually helped me through getting through to her.

A few fathers reported that they still had conflicted co-parenting relationships even when they used the communications and conflict management skills they learned in the RF programs. Blaine, for example, described his efforts to keep using the skills he learned at the Fathers' Support Center, despite continued negative interactions with the mother:

> She'll make a debate or an argument about it and try to get the last word, and I don't have time to be arguing about nothing if we're trying to raise our children. You know I won't say nothing the whole time, like I was taught in the Fathers' Support Center—set the stage. When she's talking, let her say everything what she wants to say. Then when she's done, say, "Okay, this is how you feel. Okay, this is how you feel." Don't make it about me but if I—I check my tone. My tone will be nice. I check my use of words.

Some of these fathers attributed the persistence of problems in their relationships to the fact that the mother was not using the same relationship skills, but reported continuing using these techniques nevertheless. Martin said that he learned "to be patient" and when they had disagreements to "try to work it out…to talk about it." Despite these efforts, he realized:

> It wasn't going nowhere, so eventually I had to let go… I can do my part, but I can only do my part to a certain extent. It takes two to make something work out and … I can do all the things that they taught me, but just because they taught me that doesn't mean that it's going to make her do the things that make us get along.

Most of the fathers we spoke with are in conflicted or disengaged co-parenting relationships, which confirms that the relationship skills components of fatherhood programs are needed.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RF PROGRAM DESIGN

The co-parenting experiences of fathers in the PACT study can provide important insights to RF programs as they work to improve fathers' parenting and relationship skills. Most of the fathers we spoke with (n=42) are in conflicted or disengaged co-parenting relationships, which confirms that the relationship skills components of fatherhood programs are needed. Nevertheless, it is important to restate that our interviews only highlighted the fathers' understanding of their relationships. For example, some mothers may have good reasons for choosing to disconnect from fathers, resulting in disengaged co-parenting, and fathers may not recognize these reasons or be willing to communicate them. In considering the implications for RF programs that we present below, program leaders and staff should keep in mind the concerns of both mothers and fathers.

The prevalence of conflicted and disengaged co-parenting relationships confirms the importance of offering services to help fathers navigate and potentially improve relationships with co-parents. A large majority of fathers in the PACT qualitative study (n=42), even those who had fairly regular contact with their children, did not have cooperative co-parenting relationships. Because conflicted co-parenting relationships are associated with negative consequences for children (see Davies and Cummings 1994; Hansen et al. 1996; Hanington, Heron, Stein and Ramchandani 2011; Fosco and Grych 2013; Cummings, Goeke-Morey, and Papp 2016), there is a critical need for services that develop these co-parenting relationships whenever possible and appropriate.

If not already offered, RF programs may want to find ways to offer non-legal mediation to help fathers and their children's mothers co-parent more effectively. They may also consider intensifying their efforts to include mothers in their program activities.

If not already offered, RF programs may want to find ways to offer non-legal mediation to help fathers and their children's mothers co-parent more effectively. The changes in co-parenting relationships between the wave 1 and 2 interviews suggests that improvements in fathers' relationships with their children's mothers are possible. Non-legal joint mediation or counseling may help resolve disputes, facilitate improved communication, and reduce the level of conflict in co-parenting relationships. RF programs may also consider intensifying their efforts to include mothers in their program activities. As reported by one father, Martin, improving fathers' communication and relationship skills may not be enough to improve co-parenting relationships if the mothers do not also have an opportunity to learn these skills. Although women may not be recruited for RF programs, they may be served by RF programs. While the cost of counseling cannot be covered by RF grants received from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Family Assistance, other funding could be sought to add this valuable and much needed resource for both the fathers and their children's mothers.

Nonresident fathers need help attaining the formal legal arrangements that can structure and support a greater degree of involvement with their children. Despite fathers' desire for more access and involvement in the lives of their children, only a minority of these fathers had formal visitation, joint custody, or parenting time agreements at the time we interviewed them in wave 2. In our first report (Holcomb, et al. 2015), we described how many fathers enrolled in RF programs in the hope of obtaining assistance with legal agreements that facilitate their involvement with their children. Fathers often expressed disappointment because they could not obtain free or reduced-price legal services from the RF programs, in some cases because they did not qualify for them. RF programs that receive grants from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Family Assistance cannot use grant funds to provide legal representation for fathers. Nevertheless, our findings suggest that RF programs may want to consider adding or expanding these services to help fathers gain formal shared custody or parenting time agreements, perhaps by securing alternative funding sources or establishing partnerships with agencies that are willing to provide pro bono legal services.

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It may be useful to put more emphasis on helping fathers understand the potential value of formal custody or visitation agreements. Although some fathers were content with having an informal arrangement with their children's mothers to guide how often they spent time with their children, many other fathers reported dysfunctional, sometimes even volatile, relationships with the mothers of their children. Even those who experienced small improvements in their co-parenting relationships believed this positive change might not endure. Fathers may not fully understand the potential benefits of a formal parenting time agreement compared to an informal arrangement. RF programs could be more proactive in helping fathers who rely on informal arrangements to understand the potential benefits and, if the father wishes to do so, helping them pursue joint custody or a parenting time agreement. RF programs could also establish or strengthen their collaborative relationships with the court system to help fathers navigate these processes.

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