

Prevention and Early Intervention: Fatherhood Final Report

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

February 2016

suma
SOCIAL MARKETING

research + campaigns = behavior change

www.sumasocialmarketing.com

Acknowledgments



research + campaigns = behavior change

SUMA Social Marketing prepared this report

for



Sasha Rasco, MPAff

Director

Prevention and Early Intervention Division
Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

Kim Wilson, MS

Program Specialist

Prevention and Early Intervention Division
Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

Anjolie Chaubal, MPH

Division Administrator for Program Development and Operations

Prevention and Early Intervention Division
Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

SUMA Social Marketing, Inc.

Researchers and Authors

Susan Poag, MS

Melanie Susswein, MSW

Jacque Shillis, MEd



Table of Contents

Methodology	1
Fatherhood Research	2
Fatherhood Formative Research	4
Fatherhood Stakeholder Research	4
Fatherhood Focus Group Research Findings	5
Key Findings	6
Knowledge and Perceptions of Fatherhood.....	6
Learning about Parenting	10
Experiences in the Fatherhood Programs.....	12
Recruitment and Retention.....	20
Conclusion and Recommendations.....	24
Appendices	
Appendix A: Focus Group Guide	
Appendix B: Fatherhood Advertisement Ideas & Questions	

Methodology

SUMA Social Marketing Inc. (SUMA) conducted qualitative research on behalf of the Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) programs of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS). The research was specific to initiatives of PEI's fatherhood programs.

Please note that the data gathered for this project is qualitative in nature, meaning that it addresses open-ended questions designed to explore matters of "how, why, and what," rather than "how many." Therefore, findings should be considered strongly directional rather than statistically definitive, as those of a quantitative survey might be.

Trained moderators led all focus groups. The sessions were audio-taped, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim.

During focus groups, researchers do not take exact counts of how many participants respond in a certain way on each line of inquiry, but rather foster a conversation through which participants can speak candidly. Then, as the transcripts of all focus groups are analyzed, trends emerge and qualifiers such as "few" and "most" are assigned to help the reader understand the prominence of each trend. The matrix presented below is used to qualify trends in the research.

- Few = under half
- Half = half (50%)
- Many = over half
- Most = 8 or 9 out of 10
- All = everyone (100%)



Fatherhood Research

SUMA conducted qualitative research with fathers who were currently participating in or had previously participated in PEI fatherhood programs; and with stakeholders working either directly with these programs or with programs interfacing and promoting fatherhood programming. The objectives of the fatherhood research were as follows.

- Explore the knowledge, experiences, and perceptions of men in fatherhood programs
- Identify ways to improve recruitment and retention in PEI-funded fatherhood programs

SUMA worked in collaboration with DFPS to identify four communities as key research sites. The collaboration resulted in the choice of the following sites.

- Odessa
- El Paso
- Harlingen
- Abilene

The research included the following components.

- Background research
- Stakeholder interviews ($N = 11$)
- Focus groups with fatherhood program participants, past or current (4 groups, $N = 35$)

Table 3 reflects the focus group participant breakdown by geographic location.

Table 3: Focus Group Participants, by City ($N = 35$)

City	Quantity
Odessa	6
El Paso	10
Harlingen	11
Abilene	8
Total	35



SUMA conducted in-depth interviews with 11 stakeholders. DFPS provided initial contacts to SUMA, and participating stakeholders recommended additional contacts. Interviewees represented experts knowledgeable about fatherhood programming and those currently working with DFPS PEI fatherhood programs.

Table 4 lists the participating stakeholders' names and their associated organizations.

Table 4: Fatherhood Stakeholders

Name	Organization
Noelita Lugo	Texas Attorney General's Office
Cynthia Osborne	University of Texas - LBJ School of Public Affairs - Center of Health and Social Policy and Child and Research Partnership
Jeff Temple	Associate Professor and Psychologist - The University of Texas Medical Branch
Lisa Tomaka	Child Crisis Center of El Paso
Kenneth Thompson	Texas Department of Family and Protective Services - Child Protective Services
Jose Munoz	The Children's Shelter
Rebecca Donley	Texas Attorney General - Parenting and Paternity Awareness Program
Kristen Uetrecht	BCFS Health and Human Services - Fatherhood Program
Martin Castaneda	University of Texas Permian Basin - Fatherhood Program
Saul Hernandez	BCFS Health and Human Services - Fatherhood Program
Jeff Wolpers	BCFS Health and Human Services



Fatherhood Formative Research

Fatherhood Stakeholder Research

SUMA conducted research with 11 stakeholders associated with fatherhood programs. The stakeholders were either identified by DFPS or referred by other participating stakeholders. The objectives of the research were as follows.

- Provide background context to researchers
- Learn about current child abuse and neglect prevention programs directed at fathers, barriers to accessing these programs, and perceptions of these programs
- Inform the focus group research

The stakeholders interviewed for this project were knowledgeable and provided insights into current programming and research relevant to child abuse and neglect prevention programming for fathers. Below is a list of pertinent concepts shared by stakeholders.

- Recruitment is difficult but retention is strong. Programs grow by word-of-mouth endorsements from current and past participants.
- Men report a high degree of satisfaction and personal growth from the programming.
- Incentives, such as a meal, are important to encouraging attendance and to creating a congenial atmosphere.
- Many men have not been taught how to be fathers. Some men do not understand their value or their rights as fathers.
- Program content should allow for discussion of the lack of role models in these fathers' lives and the impact that may have had on them.
- Valued program content includes tactical information on parenting, healthy relationships, how to better communicate with partners, and co-parenting.
- Fatherhood programming should include support with employment and other tangible challenges and provide referral and information on programs that may be helpful, such as WIC.

The information shared by stakeholders was largely echoed in the focus group findings and should therefore be strongly considered in the creation and evaluation of child abuse and neglect prevention programs targeted at fathers.



Fatherhood Focus Group Research Findings

On behalf of the DFPS' PEI program, SUMA conducted focus groups with men affiliated with PEI fatherhood programs. The objectives of the research were as follows.

- Explore the knowledge, experiences, and perceptions of men in fatherhood programs
- Identify ways to improve recruitment and retention in PEI-funded fatherhood programs

Table 1: Participants in Fatherhood Focus Groups (N = 35)

City	Quantity
Odessa/Midland	6
El Paso	10
Harlingen	11
Abilene	8

The Odessa/Midland group consisted of teens, including fathers as well as two young men who were expecting their first child soon; the other groups consisted of fathers/stepfathers whose children ranged in age, from infants to adults. One of the mixed-age groups included a few men who are helping care for younger siblings or nieces/nephews, or who previously had a relationship with a woman with children of her own. The men were all currently participating in or had previously participated in a fatherhood program. Some men were new to their program and had attended only a few sessions. Others had been involved for an extended period of time or had completed the program.

The following lines of inquiry were included in the focus groups.

- **Knowledge and perceptions of fatherhood**
 - How it feels to become a father
 - Rewards and challenges of parenting
 - How new fathers learn about parenting
 - What supports and services new fathers need the most
- **Experiences in a fatherhood program**
 - How participants learned about the program
 - Motivation and barriers to joining/completing a program
 - The benefits of a fatherhood program
 - How programs could be improved
- **Recruitment and retention**
 - How participants talk about the program to other fathers
 - Ideas for how to advertise the program
 - Additional services that might be helpful to fathers
 - Unanswered questions about parenting



Key Findings

Knowledge and Perceptions of Fatherhood

During the first part of each focus group, the moderator led a discussion about how participants felt when they first found out they were going to be fathers and what they have experienced as parents. In every group, the participants engaged in a lively discussion and were eager to share their stories and experiences. They quickly began having conversations among themselves about the topic, asking each other questions, commenting on what others had shared, and even commending each other on efforts to become better fathers.

Participants described experiencing a wide range of emotions upon learning they were going to be fathers: happiness, sadness, shock, excitement, fear, anger, disbelief, a sense of being overwhelmed and vulnerable, and feeling protective of their unborn child. Many said they felt mixed emotions. For some of the men, the pregnancy had been planned or expected; for others, it was a surprise.

Many of the men described changing their internal focus when they found out they were going to be a father. They immediately started thinking about becoming responsible for a child, completing their education, getting a job, or finding a better paying job. One participant talked about having to face reality; another said becoming a parent was “a leap of faith.”

All of a sudden, I had to start thinking about what am I going to do for work, started thinking about my future, where before, I didn't even know what I wanted to do. I didn't know the first thing about taking care of a child... I felt like I was buried in sand, barely able to breathe.

— El Paso

While many of the participants had not expected to become fathers and faced significant life changes as they transitioned into parenthood, they experienced much joy once their children arrived. They all like spending time with their children and described a great variety of activities they like to do with them, including:

- Spending time outside going to the park, taking walks, riding bikes, playing games and sports, hiking, camping, hunting, and fishing
- Spending time indoors playing video games, engaging in pretend play, watching TV and movies, coloring, and reading
- Going on outings such as the zoo, museum or baseball games and traveling



Many participants said having a child changed their lives for the better. They saw their lives expand because they started to think about their child and the child's mother. One of the teenage fathers said having a child meant he was a young adult (rather than a teen), a young parent, and that he has adjusted to being more mature and understanding. Another man used the analogy of a clock to explain that when he became a parent, one clock (his bad habits) stopped, and another clock (his fatherhood responsibilities) started.

Ever since he's been here, my life's actually gotten better. When most people would tell you it's going to be harder, I feel like it's easier. You got to work more and that stuff, but you're less stressed out. You have a reason to work and live. It's not just the same as you doing it for yourself. You're doing it for your own child. You just feel like a better person.
— Odessa/Midland

Before I found out that I was going to be a father, I was going down a very bad path. Lots of drugs were involved, to the point where it wasn't just recreational use. I was almost completely addicted... when I found out that I was going to be a father, [it] was a window of opportunity to make a change in my life, to leave that all in the past, to...better my future for my daughter. That's what I did.
— El Paso

When asked about the challenges of being a father, participants had a wide array of responses, ranging from the practical to the philosophical. Practical challenges included learning how to care for a baby, especially the first child: how to feed the baby, change a diaper, what to do when the baby cries or gets sick, and how to manage sleep for the child and parents.

However, in addition to the practical how-to's of caring for their child, many of their comments focused on the broader challenges of being a parent. Participants frequently mentioned challenges involved in guiding children to make good choices and disciplining them. A number of the men said they had been disciplined, as children, in ways that felt abusive. From those experiences, they knew the abuse was wrong and that they did not want to repeat it.

They thought there had to be better ways to address children's challenging behaviors (e.g., when a child refuses to listen to parents, or a teenager makes a poor decision). However, before learning alternatives in the fatherhood program, they had struggled to know what to do besides spanking.

I went from a generation where we got beat a lot – there was no “child abuse” – to a generation that now there is child abuse. You can't beat your kids no more. You've got to find a different way to teach them and educate them, so that they know what they're doing is wrong.
— Harlingen



Some men noted that co-parenting adds another level of difficulty to disciplining children. Parents may have different expectations for their children's behavior and different ideas for how to discipline. For a few of the participants, who live apart from their child's mother, different rules and behavior expectations in each household make it particularly hard for them and their children.

Me and [my daughter's] mother don't have that much communication, except where it's to pick up the kids and to drop them off, and that's it...There's different rules at Mom's house, and there's different rules at my house...Getting my children to understand why things are like that, they start questioning which one's right and which one's wrong, so it's a challenge.

— El Paso

Participants also cited co-parenting challenges that go beyond discipline, for example, differences of opinion about what time the children should go to bed, or different parenting styles and preferences for interacting with the children. For fathers who share custody in separate households, there could be "battles" about where the children spend holidays.

Another frequently mentioned challenge was being a good role model as a father. Several men described making changes in their lifestyle to become more positive role models because they know their children are watching them closely. Some described making changes as soon as they discovered they were going to become a father; others pointed to changes they made because of what they learned in the fatherhood class. These ranged from simple things—like paying attention to language—to more significant actions, like becoming a more responsible person, focusing more attention on education or work, and spending time at home in the evening and on weekends instead of going out with friends.

They're like, watching you under a microscope, and you go from being... a bad guy to trying to be a good guy, and giving them good examples. From going drinking every night... to staying home, taking care of the kids, no more partying, showing them that this is what a responsible person does – all very challenging for me. It was a whole change of lifestyle... Give up the sex, drugs, and rock and roll, and become a good husband, good dad.

— Harlingen



Several men acknowledged the challenges of meeting financial needs such as providing a home, food, and clothing. Some also said it is hard to find a balance between work and family; the time spent working to earn money means less time spent at home meeting their children's emotional needs.

One of the main [challenges] is responsibility to keep up with the job demands, with the wife demands, the social demands [pressure to purchase expensive items that other children have], to keep a balance...is frustrating when you put some of that time in the job rather than your wife and quality time with your children.

—El Paso

A few of the men described additional challenges they face because they have a child with health issues or special needs. In one case, the baby was born prematurely, and the father has had to learn how to carry and feed him without hurting him. Another father has a very young daughter with asthma and he said it is difficult to use a nebulizer with her every night. Another helps care for a brother who has autism and cerebral palsy. He noticed that this brother was often excluded from many of the activities his other brothers engage in. He has tried to plan activities he and his brother can do together, such as painting. One participant described the implications of finding out his son had autism.

We ended up finding out that he has a mild form of autism, so [I needed] advice on that, like how to deal with it. At first, I thought he was just spoiled. Then, they took him to a specialist, and we found that out. I can't just be spanking him...because he will calm down for about a minute, maybe two, and then he's back at it.

—Harlingen

Participants gave numerous examples of the rewards of parenting. They mentioned the joy of watching children reach developmental milestones, such as learning how to walk, and seeing their children succeed – for example, at school or in sports. Several mentioned getting a sense of accomplishment from teaching, guiding, and molding children, adding that it is rewarding when children listen to what their parents say and behave according to their expectations.

At the end of the day, you're going to be your child's biggest influence – one of your child's biggest influences. Just knowing that, you're going to be that big part of their life. That, in itself, is rewarding.

—El Paso



Several described the satisfaction of experiencing a transformation in their own lives, as they became a better role model and father. Some said they have become less selfish and learned how to focus on the needs of their children and the children's mother. One described growing as a person along with his child, figuring out the answers as he goes.

Your perspective and everything changes after you have kids. That's very rewarding... you get to be that person that your kids look up to.

— El Paso

Many participants described how becoming a father expanded their sense of connection, both with their children and other parents. First and foremost, they are delighted about the emotional connection with their children, such as the joy of seeing a child's first smile, experiencing unconditional love for the first time, getting kisses, opening up and bonding, and just being close. Some mentioned that becoming a parent had made it easier to relate to other parents, including their own brothers, sisters, aunts, and uncles.

Until you have a child, you can't really relate to other people who have a child. You think you can, but until you have a child, you start seeing things a lot different. You just relate to people. You're more on their level about what they go through...

— El Paso

Learning about Parenting

When asked how they learned about parenting, participants cited both positive examples of parenting on which they have modeled their own behavior, as well as negative examples they have tried to avoid as they raise their children.

Before participating in the fatherhood program, most of what the participants knew about parenting came from relatives. Many of the men said their own parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles had served as positive role models. Several described how their fathers worked hard to provide financially for the family. Many appreciated that their parents and grandparents spent time with them and guided them. A few had learned from watching their siblings, or their aunts and uncles, interact with their own children.

Mainly I owe it up to my mom... Pretty much how she raised me, I raised my kids with my love, respect, and always tending to them whenever they're in need.

— El Paso

The way that my grandparents treated me, when I had my kid, I went for their way, and talking everything out, and not punishing. To me, it was hard, but I'm glad for my grandparents. They were the ones that actually taught me how to be a parent.

— Harlingen



Many of the participants also wanted to avoid doing what they observed or experienced as children themselves. Several said their father was absent, in some cases, because he did not live with the family; in others, because he worked so much, spent time with friends, or was dealing with alcoholism. They expressed a commitment to do the opposite: to be a big part of their children's lives and spend time with them.

A few of the men said they had been abused as children. This painful experience led to a strong determination to avoid continuing the cycle of abuse with their own children. One man said he has anger issues similar to his abusive father, so he works hard to be happy and fun around the siblings he helps care for. Another looks to the more positive parenting example his mother provided.

Growing up, I was abused physically. I always look at what my mother did to try to help us. She would try to do things like play basketball, whenever we were having a hard time in school and whatnot, just to cool off for a little bit. She would try to understand us and try to help us grow together.

— Abilene

In general, the men who cited negative role models from their own childhood expressed the hope and confidence that they had learned something positive from those bad examples.

Growing up, I would just see all the wrong things, all the wrong examples. I was around all the wrong people...but that didn't persuade me to be like that. It showed me the right out of everything. It showed me to do what you got to do; do what's right instead of just going in the same footsteps...

— Odessa/Midland

When participants were asked what new fathers need most to help meet the challenges of parenting, some mentioned practical needs, such as buying diapers and learning how to feed the baby. Several noted personal characteristics: patience, common sense, confidence, a strong will, an open mind, and emotional and psychological readiness. Others cited the need for support and guidance; advice, particularly about how to discipline children; positive role models; the right partner to help them raise their child; and good communication with that partner. Not surprisingly, more sleep, time, and money were also mentioned.



Experiences in the Fatherhood Programs

Joining the Fatherhood Program

The great majority of the men learned about their fatherhood program through word of mouth. Most heard about the program through a contact in a professional role, including a high school counselor or teacher; caseworker; staff at a counseling center, rehabilitation program, or Child Protective Services office; or the fatherhood program instructor. A few heard about it through their church or a friend. Only two men learned about the program from a flyer: one at a day care center, and the other at a community resource fair.

Men were motivated to join their program for various reasons. Some were required to participate as part of a court-ordered residential program for drug and alcohol abuse. Others cited a number of personal reasons. Many noted how important it was to have:

- A chance to talk with other fathers
- An opportunity to learn what it means to be a good dad, become a better parent, and bond more closely with their children
- A way to pick up new relationship skills
- A chance to learn skills for mentoring children

Very few had faced barriers in joining the program or continuing to participate. The most commonly cited barrier for the focus group participants was scheduling time away from work to attend the classes. Transportation, or the time it took to travel to class, was mentioned a few times. One participant said someone had dropped out of his program because of language difficulties before a Spanish-speaking instructor was added to the staff.

When asked why they thought other men may be hesitant to become involved in a fatherhood program, several participants suggested pride, primarily; they do not want someone else telling them how to raise their children. Immaturity and peer pressure may keep young men from joining or completing the program. For example, it would be difficult to break away and go to a fatherhood class when friends are planning to go to the movies.

A few participants said they themselves initially had a negative attitude about the program but, once they started the class, they changed their minds.

I thought I was a good enough father. I said, "I don't really need it." I spend time with my daughters. I'm good enough. Once you start attending it [class], you realize the little tweaks that you can take to become a better father.

—Harlingen



My barrier, put plain and simple, was, "Who the hell do you think you are, telling me how good of a parent I can be? You're nobody to tell me how to raise my kids." Keep an open mind. Sit there and listen, and you realize they're [class instructors] not all that dumb. Some of the stuff they're saying does work. The more you open your mind up, the more you learn.

—Harlingen

Benefits of the Program

When asked about the benefits of a fatherhood program, participants were able to identify a number of ways it had helped them become better fathers and partners. Without exception, they said their experience in the program was positive.

Several men said the class helped them handle anger better and be more patient. In particular, a few pointed out one of the most important things they learned in the class: anger is always a second emotion, and something else comes first to trigger the anger. They believe this new understanding has helped them control their anger and discipline their children more appropriately.

In a parenting situation, my PTSD gives me a short fuse with everybody. Taking parenting classes, that is going to help me bond better with my children... It keeps my anger under control, so I don't discipline them in the wrong way. I don't discipline them out of anger.

—Abilene

I was spanking my kids. That's how I was brought up. I knew it was wrong, but they needed discipline... I sat down at the class and I started listening to what they were talking about, and how I should be reacting to her [my daughter], and how I should be thinking about what she felt... It changed my whole perspective on that.

—Harlingen

One participant's story illustrates the extent to which he has internalized an understanding of how to discipline children without anger. He recounted what happened when he was with his cousin and her daughter, and the child did something that annoyed her mother.

My cousin smacked her. I asked my cousin, "Why do you do that?" She said, "She won't listen," this and that, and I go, "Yeah, but first you talk to a child. If the child doesn't listen, then you warn the child. If the child doesn't listen, then you discipline the child. Right now you wacked her, and she didn't even know what she did wrong. How do you expect her to learn, if you're not giving her structure?" I think that it opened her eyes on how to discipline.

—Harlingen



Several participants said that learning to control anger also has improved their relationship with the mother of their children. For example, one said he has learned how to deal with his wife on a more rational basis, so she can no longer “push his buttons.” Another noted that the class taught him to avoid arguments and drama with his partner, especially in front of the children. Others said they are able to be more patient and more interested, and listen better to their partner and children. They feel like they are less selfish and more caring and understanding.

*When you go to bed, you probably have a child that, five minutes later, is screaming at you... You get frustrated at times. I catch myself cussing at a wall (laughter) because I don't want to cuss at her. I have this wall, in the middle of the room, and I just cuss at it. [The program helps] with patience. It's learning that it's not about you anymore. It's not about, "Okay, I need this number of hours of sleep, or I'm going to act like a total" – I guess, a** is the phrase I'm going to use.*

– Abilene

Several participants said the fatherhood course taught them to have more realistic developmental expectations and use age-appropriate approaches to discipline. One of the men pointed out that the manual used in his classes included a table outlining what to expect from children at different ages. Others said they valued learning about developmental levels from peers with older children who shared their struggles during discussions in class.

One thing I did learn is age-appropriate kind of stuff with different age groups... My brother's 6. This is what he knows. This is his understanding of life so far. It's like proper punishments to meet his age group.

– Abilene

Several participants described the way the program clarified and expanded their understanding of what it means to be a father.

Their examples included the inescapable reality of being a role model; the understanding that an emotional connection between a father and child is as important as providing for their financial needs; and the notion that being a good father means taking care of yourself.

It's the most lasting thing, the thing I'll never forget... [The instructor] said your kids are a foot tall, 2 feet tall, 3 feet tall. You're 5 feet tall, 6 feet tall, 7 feet tall. Just think about it. They're looking up to you. They see you as a super hero, kind of like you would see Spiderman... I thought about it. It's like that's actually true... They see you can do no wrong, so you have to think about that as you go in your parenting – your daily, monthly, weekly parenting.

– El Paso



The program has helped me with my health, to realize it is important to exercise, eat right. At first, I just felt like my health wasn't important, but this program has opened up my eyes to eating healthy and [that] doing the right things is good for you.

—Harlingen

Many men said they learned the critical importance of spending time with their children and nurturing an emotional bond. Because of the program, they feel they know how to better connect with their children or the siblings they help care for. They have learned to open up new communication channels, sometimes by taking actions as simple as putting away the phones and tablets during a meal and remembering to ask their children about their day.

Time with your kid is irreplaceable. In the book, it says from spending time with them, tucking them in at night, helping them with homework, little stuff like that that we overlook...Sometimes, I would tell my daughter, "Go to bed." Yeah, but maybe she wanted Daddy to go and tuck her in, read her a goodnight story...Time is irreplaceable, and build that bond with them.

—Harlingen

One thing I learned from there is communication is a big part of being a parent. Let's face it, none of us are mind readers. We've got to communicate with our children and whoever we're raising to try to understand them, and see what they're going through so we can help them.

—Abilene

Many of the men pointed out that, in addition to helping them become better fathers, the program had helped them become better spouses and co-parents. In particular, they cited learning how to communicate better with their children's mother or learning how to start that communication. For example, one participant described gaining the skills to question and listen to his partner when she came home angry, instead of engaging her with his own anger.

A few talked about being better able to negotiate differences in parenting style, for example, setting a bedtime for the children or working out visitation.

I had communication problems at the beginning, before taking the course. There was a certain section in the curriculum that focused on both the father and the mother and reaching a neutral point... If you want your child to go to sleep at this time, and your partner wants them to go to sleep at this time, maybe you can negotiate and agree at somewhere in the between. That's definitely something that helped me out, because I can speak to my partner a lot better now.

—El Paso



[The program has helped me with] *the communication with the wife. At times when she's upset or something, instead of avoiding her, communicate with her. Build that bond together to where you...will open up with each other.*

—Harlingen

To explore the connection between the fatherhood program and events in their daily lives, participants were asked to reflect on a recent experience that illustrated how they had applied what they learned in the classes to parenting challenges. The men gave various examples, such as knowing how to deal with a sick child, being more patient and controlling anger when communicating with the child's mother, understanding their children's behavior better because of realistic developmental expectations, and being able to deal more effectively with challenging behaviors.

For me, it's discipline. With my kids, they do get a little bit out of control, to the point that I have to raise my tone of voice. Since I've been in the program, the thing that helped me out more is to try to control the discipline...If they act up, give them some sort of reward [incentive] out of it, or...or approach the situation at a different angle.

—El Paso

The men in the focus groups frequently cited the strong connections that formed among program participants as an important benefit. Many noted that they had few, if any, chances outside the class to talk with other men about fatherhood and parenting. Opportunities to share stories with others who had experienced an abusive childhood were even rarer. The comfortable, safe environment in the classes allowed the participants to establish relationships with other men and helped decrease their feelings of isolation. One man described the classes as a "guy's night out," where the men learned from and provided emotional support for each other, without anyone, especially their partners, passing judgement. Several men said these connections were a key factor in keeping them engaged in the program.

You feel alone when you're a parent. It's like something bad's happening with your kid. When you go to class and you talk about it, you don't feel alone, because you know there are these other young dads and they go through the same thing. You just feel better.

—Odessa/Midland

Some of the stories that the dads would tell would make you cry, because it's very emotional when they're talking about how they were raised, how they were taught, and all the abuse that they went through...You don't get to tell that to your wife, or your close friends... You share all your stories...That helps you

—Harlingen

The moderator also asked what participation in a fatherhood program meant to the mothers of the men's children. Many said the mother of their baby was pleased about their involvement in the program, reacting with happiness, excitement, pride, or relief. A few said their partners had noticed and commented on their changed behavior. One said his wife greets him with tears, thanking him each time he comes home from class.



When discussing the benefits of the fatherhood programs, the participants in every group brought up the value of their relationship with the course instructor. All the men regarded their instructors highly. They appreciated their open minds, patience, professionalism, and respectful, non-judgmental attitude. They acknowledged that the instructors had valuable information to share and liked that they used a variety of teaching techniques, engaging and involving everyone in the group. The quality of the instructor was cited as a reason the men stayed in the program.

We have a good counselor. He gets very involved with us. He's very knowledgeable. I like that. Again, that he respects you a lot. He respects your answers. There's no wrong answers, or he won't make you feel less, or put you down. He wants you to better yourself as a person. For the information that he has for you, for you to apply it in your everyday life. That's what kept me in the program.

—Harlingen

Improving the Program

As described by the participants in the focus groups, the fatherhood programs in which they have been involved vary in format and length. Some classes are ongoing, for example, the teen fathers' course meets weekly at their high school for an hour — and the men can continue to participate until they graduate from school. The other programs described by the participants range in length, from seven weeks to over three months. The shorter courses generally have longer class periods, some as long as four hours; classes in the longer programs typically last an hour or two. Participants said all the programs include a mix of instruction, discussion, and activities that engage members of the group together, such as role play.

When asked what they changes they would like to see in the program, participants in every focus group said they would like to spend more time in the course. They suggested several alternatives: longer class periods, classes that meet more often than once a week, a longer time frame for the course, or some combination of these changes.

Participant 1: *It flies by, and you're like, "Dang, I had so much to ask."*

Participant 2: *You can't finish the conversation that day. You got to finish it at the beginning of next Wednesday.*

—Odessa/Midland

In addition to more time, participants also asked for more content. Several said they would like to see enough flexibility in the flow of the course, to allow them to explore topics of particular interest to the group more deeply during class. They would also like more opportunities to interact with and learn from each other during class.



In addition to changes within the existing program, participants in one group said they would like to see a separate advanced course for those who want to continue.

It didn't last long enough...it's designed as an eight-week course...and by the time you get there...you've touched on topics...There's a course outline, and...They've got to get through it...whereas, sometimes we might need to stay in this area for a while, or be able to go back to it...I would like to see that that was more of a regular group and a longer-type thing.

– Abilene

Several said they would welcome opportunities to socialize with classmates and their families, both during the time they are involved in the program and beyond. Social media was mentioned as a possible way to continue the communication and bonds established during the course, as well as providing a forum for the fathers to continue asking questions and guiding each other as peers.

In addition to improvements related to course length, class duration, and depth, participants recommended a specific change to improve program content. Early in the focus group discussions, a number of men spoke about the challenges of co-parenting and communication with the mother of their children. These challenges were brought up both by men who were living with the mother and those who were not. While acknowledging that the existing curriculum does include some helpful content about partner communication, participants said a greater focus on this aspect of parenting would be welcome. In addition to integrating more skill-building content on communication into the course for fathers, they would like to see a parallel program for the mothers to address parenting and communication, followed by a course where both parents could attend and learn together.

There wasn't enough emphasis on communicating with your spouse, with your partner. If you're sitting there arguing with them, and not communicating properly with them, the kids pick up on that. I think that would have helped out.

– Harlingen

In Abilene, the participants also considered the gender of the instructor as a factor in the quality of the program. Abilene is the only location where the fatherhood instructor is a woman. Participants in this focus group universally praised her work and cited her professionalism; however, there were mixed opinions about whether using a female instructor is the best strategy. Some felt that a female instructor would be seen as less of an authority figure and therefore more likely to help the men open up; others saw more value in having an instructor that represents a strong positive male role model.

I think people are more open to talk to a girl, especially the younger guys, because it's not an overbearing male figure. A lot of times, guys, like if I talk to [male instructor] about something, there's some things that I'm not saying, because I think he'll judge me, because we're both men. If I talk to [a female instructor], she's more understanding.

– Abilene



There are some things, when you're talking, that it would make more sense to have a male's perspective, because if somebody's telling me, "This is what it's like to be a man, and this is the way you should treat a woman," it shouldn't be a woman...Some of these guys...never had a male role model that would tell them, "You don't do that. You don't treat women that way. This is what respect is. This is what being a man is."

– Abilene

All the groups identified additional needs that might be met through the fatherhood program or other community resources. The needs varied between the teens and the mixed-aged groups. Members of the teen group said they could benefit from:

- Classes about Medicaid and WIC
- Help dealing with the juvenile justice system
- Help with their education and finding work
- Classes about safety tips and child health
- Help getting a child to a doctor.

The teens acknowledged they had not asked their instructor for this kind of help and believed program staff would help if asked.

Participants across the mixed-age groups said they would welcome social opportunities outside of class for themselves and their families, such as play dates. The men in one group suggested they would benefit from a husbands' support group, more information about how to be a better husband, and life skills training (such as how to do laundry, cook, write a check, and create a family budget).

At the end of the session, the three mixed-age focus groups had the opportunity to submit anonymous written questions about parenting that they might feel uncomfortable asking in their fatherhood group. The most frequent questions related to how and when to talk with children about sex, including STDs, contraceptives, and homosexuality.

A sample of the questions in the men's own handwriting follows. All questions can be seen in Appendix B.



Figure 1: Anonymous Parenting Questions from Focus Groups

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sex education for teens? • What are STDs? • Asking your kids if they had sex yet. 	<p>How do I talk to my stepson about me not being the biological Father.</p>	
<p>How can have a better time with my wife?</p>	<p>When is it right age to ask^{talk} about STDs, sex etc? Also About homosexuality and all that?</p>	<p>How do you build a better bond with a Step child</p>
<p>Is it ok to spank a child as discipline.</p>	<p>How do I connect with someone that has special needs.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> ① talking sex to teenagers ② communicating with children about bad friends ③ religion

Recruitment and Retention

Many of the participants had talked to others about joining a fatherhood program. Several said they saw friends or family members having trouble with their children, particularly in the area of discipline. They shared tips they had learned in the course and recommended it to others. However, very few said they had successfully recruited anyone into the program. One father said his circle of friends would not attend a class, even if they were required to do it.

They [my friends] tell me about the problems that they have with their partners or parenting, or I see that they're having problems, I tell them, "You should check out this program that we have at the center. It'll be really great, and you can learn some stuff about discipline and things like that." ...I told my cousins about them, too. They're new parents. I tried to get them to go in the program.

– El Paso

A few of the focus group participants' assessments of the overall impact of the course on their lives suggest promising ways to promote fatherhood programs. Some of their testimonials described the experience in the program as life changing.



For example, because of the program, one of the teen fathers is on track to graduate early from high school; without the program, he thinks he might not have graduated at all. Many spoke of how the program helped them make a radical shift from bad choices to good choices.

Say, you ain't making all the right choices, but yet, you already got your baby coming or your baby's here, and it's just messing you up left and right. The program could change your life. It pretty much changed my life.

– Odessa/Midland

Focus group participants experienced or perceived attitude as the most common barrier to promoting fatherhood programs. (Who are you to tell me how to parent my child? How dare you suggest there is something wrong with the way I am raising my child now.) One man's summary of the course's impact on his group offers language to cut through those attitudes: the course is a chance to become an upgraded dad.

It's a good class, and now we're just better parents. We're going to be better fathers...It's just an upgraded dad. That's all you are. You were a good dad; now you're a better dad.

– Harlingen

Participants were asked to draw or write an advertisement or flyer to promote fatherhood programs, after they discussed what they had shared with friends and family about the program and how they might encourage other fathers to join. Visual approaches included:

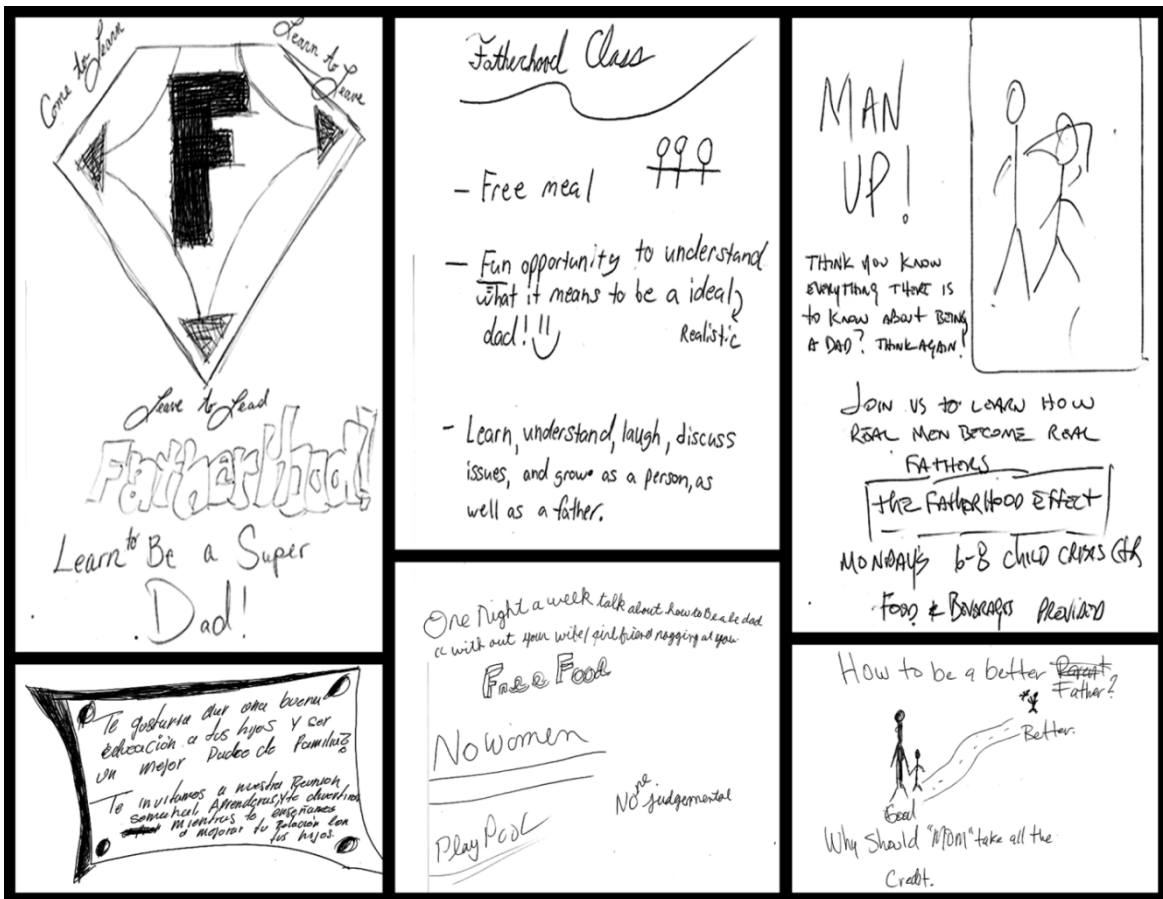
- Appealing to fathers, or the whole family, through an event or party with food, drinks, and activities
- An invitation to attend an enjoyable class to help make you a better father and better person
- Contrasting pictures of a happy father with his family and a family with problems, as well as an invitation to the class
- Offering a solution to the stresses and insecurities of being a father
- Offering answers to questions about communication, discipline, finances, self-esteem, and other topics
- Taking a father on a path from good to better, and asking, "Why should Mom take all the credit?"
- "Man Up! and face the fact you do not know everything there is to know about being a Dad. Join the class to learn how real men become real fathers."



- “Super Dad Course” with advice on parenting, how to treat kids, and how to be the better, cool dad
- An appeal to the value of the nurturing dad, based on adolescent elephants in Africa losing control because of the absence of adult males
- “Superman” symbol using a big F: “Come to learn, learn to leave, leave to lead. Learn to be a Super Dad.”
- Making it a guys’ night out activity, an opportunity to talk about how to be a dad without your wife or girlfriend nagging at you
- Incentives to join or complete the program (e.g. a free meal at each class, a \$75 gift card to join, or a prize on completion)

A sampling of their ideas follows. All ideas can be seen in Appendix B.

Figure 2: Ideas for Advertisements/Flyers to Promote Fatherhood Programs



The translation of the Spanish flyer (bottom left) is: “Would you like to better raise your children and be a better father? We invite you to our weekly meeting. You will learn and enjoy yourself while we teach you to improve your relationship with your children.”

Participants also shared a number of general ideas about promoting fatherhood programs:

- Use social media. Put an invitation to become an extreme dad on Facebook and Twitter. Develop a fatherhood app. Use YouTube. Livestream sessions and allow virtual participants to submit questions that become the topic of the future sessions.
- Use quotes from the fatherhood manual on flyers, posters, and social media.
- Make T-shirts.
- Tell everyone you know about the program.
- Use testimonials from people whose lives have changed because of the course.
- Offer a hotline number.
- Distribute business cards with contact information for the course.
- Disseminate information about the program at Planned Parenthood, the Child Protective Services office, schools, colleges, libraries, and parks.
- Work through the judicial system to get fathers community service credit for completing a fatherhood program, and offer the program to dads who are on probation, for example, fathers who have not paid child support.
- Offer courses at churches, day care centers, and the YMCA.
- Coordinate with Head Start programs to offer the course at their centers and promote the program at their monthly meetings.



Conclusion and Recommendations

The PEI fatherhood programs appear to be achieving the intended goals of helping fathers deal with the stress of parenting and becoming the parents they want to be. The men in the focus groups gave many examples of how the program had helped them. They have:

- Learned how to manage their anger and be more patient with their children and partner
- Discovered age-appropriate approaches to discipline that are not based on anger
- Learned how to better communicate with the mother of their children
- Expanded their understanding of what it means to be a father, including the importance of an emotional connection with a child
- Gained general knowledge about parenting and acquired practical skills
- Established a network of trusted peers, with whom they can share their struggles as a father and seek guidance

The participants also offered a few ideas for strengthening programming, most notably:

- Increase the time spent in the program through options for longer classes, longer courses, and an advanced course, as well as ways for men to continue their connections beyond the course.
- Add flexibility in the course schedule to allow for a deeper exploration of topics of particular interest to the group.
- Increase the focus of the program on communication with the children's mother, through a combination of additional content for fathers, separate programming for mothers, and joint programming for fathers and mothers.
- Provide avenues for fathers to meet needs that have an impact on their effectiveness as a father but are not related directly to parenting, for example, life skills.



Together, these findings suggest the following recommendations.

- Continue and expand the PEI fatherhood programs.
- Enhance the programs to allow the men to spend more time learning together, and increase flexibility to allow participants to address topics of particular interest more deeply. Consider adding sessions that include mothers and offering an advanced course for fathers.
- Keep men who have participated in the program engaged through opportunities outside of class. Give them a chance to experience real world application of the skills they learned. Consider adding a component in future RFPs for fatherhood programs to require the contractor to set up a structure for ongoing engagement of graduates and their families, for example, monthly meet-ups or playdates.
- Incorporate social media into programming for quick connections and sharing.
- Incorporate more life skills and topics (cooking, financial management, laundry, etc.) into classes or link participants to community resources that offer the training.
- Ensure that relevant community agencies – for example, Veterans Affairs, local mental health authority, WIC, Head Start, and the schools – are aware of the fatherhood program and promote it.

