

# What Nonresident Mothers and Fathers Have to Say About a Mother-Only Coparenting Intervention: A Qualitative Assessment of Understanding Dads™

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## Abstract

Coparenting between mothers and nonresident fathers is a consistent predictor of positive father involvement and is shown to have a direct positive impact on children's behavioral outcomes. While many fatherhood programs attempt to improve coparenting relationships using father-only interventions, the information on their effectiveness is mixed. Couple interventions may be more effective than father-only approaches but are very hard to achieve with nonresident parents. Engaging mothers may be more practical and beneficial, although there is very little literature on the impact of mother-only interventions on coparenting relationships. The current study begins to address that gap. It presents qualitative reactions by mothers and fathers to a mother-only coparenting intervention and finds that a mother-only approach can achieve some important goals such as improved communication, reduced conflict, and mother's understanding of the father's point of view. Fathers whose parenting partners participated in the mother-only group agreed with mothers' assessments and also reported less undermining.

## Keywords

coparenting, intervention, evaluation/outcomes/accountability, parenting, motherhood, fatherhood, nonresident fathers

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## Introduction

Positive coparenting relationships are necessary to realize the goals of increasing nonresident fathers' long-term relationships with their children, the financial support they provide, and child well-being. This observation is based on research finding that (a) positive forms of involvement by nonresident fathers are associated with children's social and emotional well-being, academic achievement, and behavioral

adjustment (Adamson & Johnson, 2013), and (b) the most salient predictor of nonresident

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father involvement is the quality of the father's relationship with the mother (Cowan et al., 2010; Sobolewski & King, 2005). Improving coparenting relationships, especially among unmarried, nonresident parents, however, is challenging. Although researchers have suggested that coparenting interventions would be more effective if both mothers and fathers were involved (Fagan, 2008), and practitioners have called for greater efforts and incentives to address coparenting and involve mothers (Froehle, 2008), programs have had little success in recruiting mothers for coparenting interventions offered through fatherhood programs (Dion et al., 2015).

The current study examines qualitative reactions to a coparenting intervention called Understanding Dads™ developed by the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI). As a companion to quantitative studies by the authors that examine the characteristics of mothers who are interested in participating in a coparenting class (Fagan, Henson, & Kaufman, 2019), and a study of the extent to which this mother-only program is associated with improved maternal and paternal perceptions of coparenting relationships and maternal attitudes about coparenting with fathers (Fagan, Pearson, Henson, & Kaufman, 2019), this paper presents the themes that emerge from qualitative interviews with mothers who participated in the coparenting class and some fathers whose partners participated. The goal is to inform the responsible fatherhood field about how parents who participate in a mother-only coparenting intervention view it and whether it is a promising approach that should be incorporated in fatherhood programming.

## Background on Coparenting

Recent research on low-income fathers has focused on the association between the father-mother coparenting relationship and fathers' engagement with children (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011). Researchers' interest in this association stems from data showing that many low-income fathers and mothers do not have supportive coparenting relationships. Although

there are many factors that contribute to fathers' and mothers' lack of coparenting support, two leading predictors are the deterioration of the father-mother romantic relationship and couples not residing together (Osborne & McLanahan, 2007). Researchers have also suggested that a decline in mothers' and fathers' coparenting relationships is one of the main reasons that fathers are not engaged with their children. It is especially important to understand the association between coparenting and father engagement among low-income couples because fathers and mothers can still have supportive coparenting relationships even when no longer together as a couple. Carlson et al. (2008) reported that within the first year of a non-marital childbirth, 48% of fathers are living away from their children, and that the incidence of nonresidential fathering increases to 56% and 63% of households during years 3 and 5 post-delivery, respectively. Though supportive coparenting relationships tend to decrease over time in nonresidential couples, supportive coparenting after relationship dissolution is associated with higher levels of father engagement with children (Kamp Dush et al., 2011).

Although many fatherhood programs work with participants to improve coparenting relationships, the literature on the efficacy of including coparenting content in Responsible Fatherhood (RF) curricula is mixed. The results of the PACT evaluation, an RCT of four responsible fatherhood programs that each include substantial coparenting components, indicated no statistically significant difference on self-perceptions of coparenting alliance, support, or conflict among fathers in the experimental and control groups (Avellar et al., 2018).

Other studies, however, are more encouraging. The *Caring for My Family* study found a moderate, positive effect on self-reported coparenting 1 week after program completion for nonrandomized treatment group participants compared to control group parents (Cox & Shirer, 2009). Fagan and colleagues (2015) found that mothers who participated in a pilot study of the Understanding Dads™ program, which aims to improve mothers' understanding

of fathers and their communication and cooperative coparenting behaviors, exhibited significant gains in coparenting knowledge at the end of the program. A recent randomized control trial of the Ridge program in Ohio also found that fathers' self-reported coparenting relationships improved at post-test and 3-month follow-up after participating in a fatherhood curriculum called TYRO DADS, which includes a coparenting component (Kim & Jang, 2018).

Another facilitation/mediation intervention with fragile families that aims to reconnect fathers to their children through the development of parenting plans and to promote more regular child support payments showed high rates of program completion and development of a coparenting plan (McHale & Carter, 2012). An evaluation of the Co-Parent Court, which incorporates coparenting into a broader parent education, case management, and community referral intervention for unmarried parents establishing paternity in Hennepin County, Minnesota, reached the same conclusions (Marczak et al., 2015). And a meta-analytic study of responsible fatherhood program outcomes found significant increases in father's coparenting skills following program participation (Holmes et al., 2018).

The literature on maternal engagement in coparenting interventions offered in conjunction with fatherhood programs is equally mixed. Although researchers believe that coparenting interventions would be more effective if both mothers and fathers were involved in the intervention (Fagan, 2008), many mothers are reluctant to engage, with or without the participation of the father. For example, although three of the four fatherhood programs participating the PACT evaluation encouraged current or past partners to join relationship workshops either with the father or by participating in a separate workshop for female partners, they were poorly attended (Zaveri et al., 2015). While a third of the fathers reported a cooperative relationship with the mother of their child, 40% were disengaged with low cooperation and low conflict, leaving PACT researchers to

speculate whether these mothers had little interest in participating in coparenting interventions because of low levels of contact or a feeling that the relationship was beyond repair.

A research project that attempted to engage mothers in a coparenting intervention conducted through a fatherhood program sponsored by Talbert House in Ohio, was ultimately converted to a small, qualitative assessment because mother recruitment proved to be virtually impossible (Whitton & Sperber, 2018). Although interviewed mothers and fathers thought that coparenting services might be valuable, they didn't participate because of bad parental relationships, mother's distrust of the fatherhood program to represent her interests, inconvenient class schedules and location, weaknesses in staff communication and outreach, and misunderstanding about the purpose of the coparenting service (Whitton & Sperber, 2018).

Another evaluation of efforts to engage mothers in a single-session, mother-only coparenting intervention in Kentucky was more successful in engaging mothers but also challenging with only 40% of invited mothers agreeing to participate (Perry, 2019). In a similar vein, the study of mother engagement conducted by the authors of this article, found that only 43% of targeted mothers attended at least one session of a six-session, mother-only coparenting program, despite the fact that incentives of \$45 per session were given to attendees to defray the cost of child care and transportation (Fagan, Pearson, Henson, & Kaufman, 2019).

These inconsistent findings on the effectiveness of fatherhood programs in producing coparenting outcomes and the difficulties of engaging mothers in coparenting interventions necessitate a closer examination of the myriad of issues pertaining to the context and needs of different groups of fathers and mothers. Would some groups of fathers and/or mothers benefit more than others from coparenting services and thus be targeted? Might some coparenting intervention approaches be more potent than other approaches? And what about the effectiveness of mother-only classes?

On a more basic level, some have even questioned whether the typical focus of coparenting programs on improved communication and shared responsibility with the mother is even relevant when fathers have highly conflicting or disengaged relationships with the mothers of their children, have multiple children by multiple partners, and/or provide little to no economic support. Rather than trying to teach behaviors like communication and conflict resolution, Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) researchers advocate for changing mindsets and behavior by teaching skills in support, empathy and acceptance (Bradbury & Lavner, 2012). They emphasize the need to include positive principles, such as forgiveness, commitment and sacrifice in the study of relationships (Finchman et al., 2007); urge a focus on forgiveness (McNulty, 2008), compassion (Bradbury et al., 2001), individual character strengths and attachment (Gottman, 1999; Miller et al., 2003); or advocate for hybrid approaches that combine both behavioral and social-cognitive-psychological perspectives with mindfulness practices (Hawkins, 2016).

These debates suggest the need for investigations that consider the aspects of coparenting interventions low-income, nonresident parents find to be helpful and the changes that participating parents actually experience. Do the benefits that participating mothers and fathers report support the continuation of the skill-based approaches that have been used so far? Should there be a shift to encouraging empathy and acceptance? What do parents themselves actually have to say about these different approaches?

## Methods

As part of a larger mixed-methods study on a coparenting intervention (Fagan, Pearson, Henson, & Kaufman, 2019), this article draws from qualitative semi-structured interviews (and one focus group) conducted with mothers who participated in Understanding Dads™, a NFI coparenting intervention (total  $N$  of mothers = 17) and with fathers whose child's mother participated in the intervention ( $N$  = 12).

Mothers were recruited into the coparenting intervention one of three ways: (a) the father was recruited through advertisements at the urban agency sites or information sessions conducted at other community-based parenting programs and provided contact information for the mother, (b) the mother was recruited through advertisements in local and online mothering groups, or (c) the mother reached out to the coordinator after hearing of the class from a previous participant. Fathers who were recruited directly identified a "target mother" with whom they were interested in bettering their coparenting relationship and provided her contact information to the project coordinator who later reached out to her. If the mothers were recruited in the latter two categories, they would provide the coordinator with the father's contact information and the coordinator would see if the father was (a) interested in enrolling in the responsible fatherhood program and (b) interested in participating in the coparenting study. The mother were only deemed eligible to participate in the coparenting intervention if the father responded affirmingly to both.

The coparenting intervention study employed a pretest/posttest/follow-up design (there was no control or comparison group) with a total of 22 cohorts across five urban social service agency sites. Two cohorts took place in New York City, one in Colorado, two in Pennsylvania, two in New Jersey, eight in South Carolina, and seven in California. Mothers who participated in the intervention were compensated \$30 after completing three surveys (pretest, post-test, and 3-month follow-up) and \$45 to \$50 per class, depending on the site, to cover the cost of child care. Anywhere from 6 to 10 mothers participated in each of the class cohorts and a total of 120 mothers attended at least one session across all sites. The fathers of the participating mother's child also completed a pretest, post-test, and follow-up survey prior to, directly after, and 3 months after the mother completed the Understanding Dad™ class. The fathers were compensated US\$30 after completing each survey.

For the qualitative interviews, we compiled a list of phone numbers for the mothers who participated in the intervention and the

fathers of their children and called at random times to schedule the qualitative interviews. Those who agreed to participate were compensated an additional US\$30 for their time. Upon obtaining consent from participants, individual interviews took place over the phone with one researcher administering the interview guide while another researcher listened silently and took detailed notes, which permitted verbatim transcription. The focus group occurred in person at the New Jersey site and was audio-recorded and later transcribed. Both phone interviews and the focus group focused on the issues of self-awareness, likes and dislikes about the intervention, and any noticeable change in the coparenting relationship since participation.

Interviewed mothers were asked a variety of open-ended questions: why had they been interested in the coparenting class, did they find the class useful, program likes and dislikes, coparenting experiences prior to and following class participation, feelings about self and the father as parents, levels of conflict with the other parent, and ways of dealing with disagreements. Interviewed fathers were asked whether coparenting, conflict, and communication with the other parent had changed following class participation. Once all of the interviews were completed, the focus group transcripts and interview notes were reviewed and coded using an iterative approach. Four codes emerged for mothers and were defined and entered in a codebook: *Salient curriculum components*, *Change in coparenting relationship*, *Self-reflection*, and *Empathy for father*. The same four codes were used for father interviews with the substitution of *Empathy for father*, with *Empathy for mother*. Two researchers separately referenced the codebook while analyzing the interview notes and transcripts and coded quotes and notes that aligned with the specific code definitions. Once all of the interviews were coded, the researchers conducted an inter-rater reliability check to test the level of agreement across the two coders. The researchers found more than 80% agreement across the coded segments, thus demonstrating reliability.

Interviewed mothers and fathers resembled their counterparts in the full sample who participated in the coparenting intervention, with the exception of income level for fathers where qualitative interview subjects were better earners,  $t(104) = 2.60$ ,  $p = .001$ . Key demographic characteristics of interviewed parents are as follows. Regarding interviewed fathers, most were Black (75%), educated to the high school level (38.6%) or less (23%), had an average age of 32.7 ( $SD = 6.11$ ) years, and had 2.5 children aged 6.2 years ( $SD = 4.88$ ). The average annual income for interviewed fathers was \$15,000 to \$20,000. Interviewed mothers were more apt to be White (36%), although 54.5% were Black and were more highly educated than interviewed fathers with 30% educated to the high school level or less, 43.5% attending some college and 17.3% holding a college degree. The average age of mothers in the qualitative study was 30.41 years ( $SD = 6.24$ ), they had an average of 2.6 children with an average child age of 5.4 years ( $SD = 7.76$ ). Their average annual income was \$5,001 to \$15,000. Only about 16% of the participating mothers and fathers lived together at the time of the interviews.

The eight-session Understanding Dads™ program for mothers was condensed into six sessions conducted over six consecutive weeks with each session lasting 2 hours. The first three sessions focused on the roles of mothers and the impact of one's own father and mother on self. The second half of the program focused on relationships with the fathers of their children, the impact of these various relationships on their children, and healthy pro-relationships skills such as building a foundation for effective communication, creating an open and safe environment for communication, and learning how to effectively list to their partner. Each session included a range of activities, including hand-book work, discussion, presentation, and role-play. In addition, each session provided opportunities for mothers to gain relationship knowledge and awareness as well as to learn about relationship skills that they could use in daily life. At the end of each session, the participants reviewed the material learned and

answered a couple of skills and aptitude-specific questions. Mothers highlighted the following aspects of their experience in the qualitative telephone interviews that we conducted with them.

## Results

### *Mother Reactions to Participating in the Understanding Dads™ Coparenting Intervention*

*Peer support and facilitator expertise.* As in so many group-based interventions, peer support was a key source of satisfaction for mothers who participated in Understanding Dads™. Hearing from others normalized the experiences that single mothers were having and helped them feel less inadequate about their interactions with the other parent and their children. Indeed, hearing that they were not alone and that other mothers shared their experiences boosted mothers' confidence in coparenting, an outcome finding that was significant in the pre-test/post-test assessment of 105 mother participants,

I learned that it's normal. I used to feel guilty about not having two parents in the home and working a lot and not spending enough time with her. I can't take her to school and sports. But I learned that a lot of moms are in similar positions and I am feeling less traumatized by it.

Other parents were going through it and they shared the outrage of things I was frustrated with. I needed to discuss with others and see their point of view, so that I know I am not crazy. When you're the only one going through it, you think you're crazy, but when there are other people going through it you can discuss it.

Mothers also appreciated the expertise of the facilitator and the professionalism she brought to the peer discussion. Both the other participants and the facilitator served to reinforce participant perceptions of not being alone,

Most of this stuff I already knew. But it's just good to see somebody professional with you. So, it's like, "Okay, well I know I'm not crazy."

You know? That's what other women go through. So, you're like—and that's another thing that helps a lot too. You know you're not the only one.

*Useful information and activities.* Some material and activities were singled out as being particularly useful by interviewed mothers. For example, several found the "emotional bank" that was described as a helpful metaphor and noted that they were consciously making "emotional deposits" in anticipation of being able someday to realize important "withdrawals." As one participant put it, "I've been doing more deposits than withdrawals."

Another helpful program tool was the request to select an animal with which they shared certain personality traits which helped them with self-awareness,

We even had one lesson where we had to identify ourselves with an animal. And we came to the conclusion that I was the owl. An owl is somebody who is like the know-it-all with the facts. And that is so me. And I'm like, "Wow, that's so me." So, when I went home, I did it with him . . . who he thinks I was. And he was like, "Oh, you're definitely the owl." And he's always the turtle. Because I believe I intimidate him, so he'd shy away. Like he'll shut down.

Mothers found it helpful to discuss how they had been parented by their own fathers and mothers, with some realizing that they were repeating patterns of their own childhood and doing things that they had hoped to avoid,

We got a little emotional in the beginning about our parents and how it reflects a lot about we do about parents. I noticed a lot of things I swore I would never do when I had kids that my parents did, that I do. I was like whoa, I tried to avoid it so much, but I started to do the same thing. So, it was a real good reflection that we need to deal with what our parents did, what my mom did because she was probably learning, and all we can strive to do is just be better. My father used to name call with us a lot and I don't do it too much, but I slip and then I think that's not good, and then after a while you start to believe it. So, it was a really good listen.

Finally, several interviewed mothers thought the program made them “pay more attention” to how they spoke, their tone of voice and their body language. As mothers became more aware of their emotions and “how they got in the way a lot of time,” they were able to use the tools they had learned in the class to do things differently “instead of jumping the gun.”

*Changes in communication and conflict.* Mothers reported making a variety of changes in how they communicate with the other parent and how they deal with disagreements following coparenting classes. As one mother put it, “I don’t jump the gun or bust at him anymore.” Another mother credited the class with helping her “not to get mad about things.” A third maintained that she no longer “stops texting or hangs up the phone on him . . . and actually listens to what he says.” And a fourth mother said she was trying not to “ruminate on situations or bring (them) back up to get control over it.” Consistent with the significant reductions in conflict and disagreement observed in the larger pre–post evaluation of Understanding Dads™, mothers described improved communication, fewer arguments, and lower levels of conflict,

We wouldn’t talk at all. We wouldn’t get along. Every time he came there was an argument. Now I’ve learned to be quiet and listen. I’ve been learning stuff [in class]. I try to be understanding and hear his point of view. I praise him when he does something good. I think he likes that I’m now not mean. We don’t fight. We respect either other now.”

Now we are quick to see we are saying the same things. Sometimes we don’t realize we are saying the same thing. Now we listen to the whole thing that another person is saying, and that helps to realize we are saying the same thing. Reduces conflict.”

*Changing expectations, and reducing emotionality.* Mothers credit learning a variety of new “tools” for helping them improve communications and lowering the level of conflict that they experienced. A chief one was changing

their expectations about father behavior and letting go of unrealistic ones. As a result of going to the classes, they stopped “expecting him to see things the way I do.” They were also trying to be less emotional and more business-like in their interactions,

Biggest thing I got from class is unrealistic expectations. I try to think from his point of view. In the past, I would expect him to see things the way I do. For example, if he doesn’t show up, I would expect he would know how that makes me feel. I am learning to let that go. I am interacting with him differently. I try to take emotion out of it. I try to be very clear and concise about what I expect from him. It has made a difference in that it doesn’t make me feel as crazy and upset. But it has not changed his behavior.

The class session about realistic and unrealistic expectation was the best. Have your expectations changed. I used to want him to spend the whole day with the children. Now I understand when he cannot spend the entire day. I am being more realistic.

I can stop myself now. I think more about what I am going to say. I don’t react as much. He isn’t reacting as much to me either. Because I am not yelling so much, he doesn’t react.

*Changes in father’s behavior.* Since most mothers were recruited by men who had participated in a fatherhood program, at least some mothers who saw improvements in fathers’ behavior credited these changes to the father’s program attendance. Although these parents did not attend coparenting classes together (the condition believed to be associated with the greatest coparenting outcomes (Pilkington et al., 2019), both had probably experienced a fairly simultaneous parenting and coparenting intervention. According to one mother, “The classes he attended gave him a lot of insight and he is different with the children now which makes it easier between us.” Another said, “he has more patience, it’s easier to get understanding into his head.” And one mother characterized the simultaneous impact of both his and her program participation this way,

There wasn't a lot of fighting before, but this opened us up that we can have communication instead of lying to one another. When he had an outlet to go to his program, he knew how to come at me and vice versa for when I got to my program. I didn't think things were that bad until I got there and then saw what I could improve on.

The following describes a more explicit conversation between a mother participant and the other parent that acknowledged the changes he had made,

And it's funny because, um the day before yesterday, we had gotten into a little argument, and he made a statement, he goes, "But you have seen I changed." And I'm like, "I've noticed. I've noticed. I'm going to give you that credit because, I've been paying very good attention to you, and you have, a whole lot." Like, he doesn't get too angry about the littlest things that he usually would get angry about. He's not as frustrated anymore when it comes to like a money situation. He'll—he'll just—he'll handle—he'll handle his let-downs way better . . . Like, he had a small let-down another day about this job he was looking for, he didn't get it. Usually, he'll sit there and beat himself up and say, "What am I doing wrong?" and "Why?" And he just goes, "Well, the only thing I can do is try, keep trying." I'm like, "You're right. Your time will come."

One behavioral change—increases in father-child contact—did not show up in a quantitative analysis of a larger sample of mothers but was mentioned in some interviews. Thus, a few mothers said that contact had increased because fewer father-child visits were aborted due to parental fights,

Rudy is spending more time with Rudy Jr. now (4–5 hours now). He was spending 3–4 hours before and then he would leave because we would get into a fight. Rudy is now more willing to help financially when he can.

**Greater self-reflection.** Mothers credited the classes with making them more reflective and self-aware. Several acknowledged that the classes helped them see that they were not totally blameless, had behaved in ways that

triggered negative reactions, and had played a role in causing conflict:

I realized that sometimes I would cause arguments. Now I am more aware of conversations and thing that come up to not get mad at him or get mad for the wrong reason and try to remain in "You know what, I am not gonna argue."

I get mad really fast. I'm trying to control that. He says I got to think before I do. I don't want to mess that up because I want him to be in the kids' life. I'm working on it by trying to be understanding and not saying anything. It's really hard since I want it my way but I'm learning.

I thought I was great! I thought I didn't have a flaw, but taking the classes made me reflect on what I needed to work on, more like a lot of situations that I put myself into that didn't need to. I have an alcoholic father, so I would get emotional and he would get emotional and I think that I realized there were a lot of things I could do.

I'm used to doing things alone. Now I know how to ask, "What's your opinion?" Because I know cause I've been through it. But the fact that I nagged him a lot, that I approached him probably made him feel inferior sometimes

I think some of us women are rude, and I've seen it. I've seen it with some of my own friends and how there are a lot of stuff and obstacles just to let the dads see the kids and they get a whole bunch of money for the kid and then they put time limits because they are one minute late so next week, you're not seeing her.

**Feeling empathy.** A final class outcome that mothers cited had to do with empathy, or "looking at things from his point of view." By shifting their perspective to the other parent, mothers reported being able to listen better to the other parent, overlook things that had previously been irritating, forgive behavior that they had found upsetting, and extend more "kindness." In some cases, empathy extended beyond the parenting role and extended to the many financial challenges that the other parent faced,



Through the class, we applied it and it worked. Being more empathetic, looking at things from his point of view. Let it go good, even when it starts to go bad.

At first, I didn't see things from his point of view, I just thought he didn't know what he was talking about. But once we learned about compassion and learning to be compassionate and understanding I feel like I can understand what he's saying

There's been some change in feeling sorry for my child's father when he is having problems. I feel somewhat more protective of him; more likely to look at his side in a disagreement before making a decision" –Maybe it might be helpful if I do, you know, give him compliments, and extend my hand more. Um so, I've always been so headstrong, and so stern, and I had this mindset like, "You're a man, you need to fix things on your own. You have to do these on your own." But it's nothing wrong with me helping him a little bit with something positive. Everybody doesn't know how to get back on their feet once they get knocked off. He's the kind of person now that he's down, it's hard for him to get back on top.

### *Father Reactions to the Coparenting Intervention*

The phone interviews with fathers highlighted and confirmed some of the intervention outcomes mentioned by the mothers. Specifically, fathers mentioned changes in communication and conflict and the mothers' newfound consideration of the fathers' perspective.

*Changes in communication and conflict.* Several fathers noted that the mothers of their children were less likely to engage with them in arguments, and more likely to be understanding, patient, and less defensive in conversation. As one father exclaimed, "It's amazing that I don't have to really worry about the arguments." Another observed that the intervention had made it easier for him to be close to the mother,

Before the classes we were a little more distant, when we were around each other we were not

getting along so well . . . . The changes are just more and less us being around each other more without an argument and being able to understand each other's sides.

Still another father credited the mother's participation in the coparenting intervention to reduced levels of conflict,

There was negative communication and now it is positive communications . . . the classes avoid a bunch of fights . . . From then to now, I'm guessing after the class, it's gotten a lot healthier there is less bickering, fighting over the little things.

In a similar vein, a father noted, "She was always willing to work but our opinion on things, our perception on things was different. Now, it's less stressful. The collaboration is easier."

When asked whether the coparenting relationship had changed since the mother of his child attended the class, a father replied,

To me it did some good because we can talk to each other without arguing. We can sit and discuss what we gonna do and how we gonna do it and how we can work the visitation. Before we couldn't do that but now we can sit around and talk and make sure our kids see us getting along.

Another father replied similarly to the same question, "It has actually gotten better because instead of everything being one sided, the parenting has gotten a lot easier." He felt as though the communication tools he was learning in his own parenting class integrated well with the communication tools the mother was learning in her coparenting course,

For the last month or so it's gotten better. We try not to be at each other's neck. The classes been helping. As far as when we communicate, they tell us we can't get nothing done with us both being mad at each other and being with some of the older guys in the class getting tips from them. They tell me if she upset and she don't wanna talk and you feel like as adults we should be able to express ourselves so give her some time and let everyone calm down without that

negative energy and heat cause when we get angry we hurt each other. Just my approach. They tell me to walk away sometimes to give her a breather. Everything is going well, it's just about teamwork.

*Considering fathers' perspectives.* Fathers attributed the mothers' reduced level of hostility to her becoming more empathetic and understanding the father's perspective. When asked whether the mother of his child was better able to see his side of a disagreement after taking the class, a father replied, "Yes, most definitely. Just easier to get along and to work out things between each other. She's able to understand my perspective." Another father made a similar statement,

Since the classes she doesn't look at things one way, like her way. She says okay you made some good points, but here is how I see it and we come to mutual agreement. Sometimes I let her go her way and sometimes she lets me go my way and now we just compromise since the classes.

Notably, some of the fathers said that they were responding to the greater patience and understanding that mothers were demonstrating by modeling this behavior themselves. For example, when asked about methods of managing conflict, one father stated,

Well I gotta say you know listening more and paying more attention, not always thinking about my way because they have feelings and emotions too. It's kinda new. I always had patience but I think that now I know certain things ain't gonna go my way . . . I guess I was more aggressive and kind of demanding. Its changed a lot. I feel like more of listener and hearing them out.

Another father also felt as though he was learning vicariously through the mother, "So far things have been easy since classes. I am learning how to listen more."

## Discussion and Conclusion

Engaging mothers in coparenting interventions is difficult to do. Only about 40% of targeted

mothers appear to be willing to participate, despite the use of attractive incentives and strong outreach efforts. Once engaged, however, mothers (and the father of their children) find it to be valuable. Pre- and post-test evaluation of the 105 mothers and 73 fathers whose parenting partner participated in the six-session Understanding Dads™ curriculum found that mothers reported significant improvements in communication, fewer disagreements with the father, and, increased confidence in their ability to coparent with the father, while fathers reported significantly less undermining by the mother. Interviews and focus groups with 17 and 12 of these mothers and fathers, respectively, revealed a variety of reactions and perceived changes that are consistent with the quantitative results. Mothers reported learning some emotional and practical tools in the coparenting program including being more aware of their own behavior, holding fewer unrealistic expectations about the other parent, interacting with reduced levels of emotion, considering his perspective, and feeling more empathy for his situation.

Some mothers reported that the other parent had demonstrated some parenting improvements as a result of participating in a fatherhood program, although this was not substantiated in the quantitative study. The qualitative interviews with fathers reinforced mothers' observations of improved communication and reduced levels of conflict. Fathers felt as though mothers were more understanding and empathetic, which aligns with the quantitative findings of reduced undermining.

The interview findings suggest that brief, mother-only interventions have the potential to improve coparenting among low-income, nonresident parents in striking ways. Although some mothers would have liked to continue meeting and a few suggested the value of including fathers in the group, most mothers appreciated the support they received from other mother participants and a trained facilitator. The mix of discussion, activities and reflections was also appealing. Finally, the findings lend support for interventions that try to teach both behavioral strategies like communication and conflict resolution as

well as skills in support, empathy, and acceptance (Bradbury & Lavner, 2012).

Several aspects of the Understanding Dads™ curriculum appear to do a good job of fostering empathy and self-reflection and might be considered for replication in other coparenting interventions. These include attention to a mother's experience with her own father, the use of metaphors such as an "emotional bank" to promote understanding of communication patterns, the introduction of animal analogies to describe and highlight different conflict styles, and a focus on realistic and unrealistic relationship expectations.

The interview findings also suggest that mother-only interventions can have positive impact on coparenting outcomes. While the "gold standard" for coparenting interventions may well be couple-based with both parents participating together (Pilkington et al., 2019), these interviews suggest that a mother-only approach can achieve some important goals such as improved communication, reduced conflict, and mother's understanding of the father's point of view. This is an important finding given the limited and/or negative relationships of many unmarried, nonresident parents. Although this study doesn't test the effects of father-only interventions on coparenting, that some mothers observed improvements in father behavior following his participation in a fatherhood program suggests that separate, but parallel coparenting interventions for parents may be an effective format. Indeed, separate but parallel education interventions for divorcing parents have been used in many court settings to promote coparenting and reduce children's exposure to conflict while reducing the risk of domestic violence (Thoennes & Pearson, 1999).

Study weaknesses include the small number of respondents who were drawn from a pool of mothers who self-selected to participate in a coparenting intervention. Fully 55% of mothers who were approached about the opportunity to participate in a coparenting class declined, and their views about coparenting are totally omitted from our study. Thus, the quantitative and qualitative findings

from the study are limited to the 45% of mothers willing to consider participation, and the 38% that actually attended classes and completed the pre- and post-test surveys. Since the group of interviewed fathers was also more highly educated than the larger sample of fathers in the quantitative study of this coparenting intervention, the interview findings may not be representative.

The study has implications for research. It suggests that coparenting and relationship studies that have focused exclusively on communication and conflict outcomes may be overlooking outcomes that are not typically assessed such as empathy, self-awareness, and realistic relationship expectations. Researchers should develop and validate measures of these types of outcomes. We also need studies that compare coparenting outcomes for mothers and fathers who participate in interventions together and separately. The goal of these studies would be to determine whether there is greater similarity in their ratings of their coparenting relationships following program treatments as compared with before.

Finally, the study has implications for fatherhood program practice. If improving child outcomes tracks with positive father engagement, and mother-father relationship quality is a key predictor of father engagement, then fatherhood programs may need to make coparenting and maternal engagement more of a priority. This may necessitate the adoption of new curricula that promotes realistic relationship expectations and empathy, and new program structures and collaborations that may enhance mother engagement.

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