

Pilot Study of a Program to Increase Mothers' Understanding of Dads

JAY FAGAN*
MOLLIE CHERSON*
CHRISTOPHER BROWN*
ERIC VECERE*

The present study evaluated the effects of mothers' participation in an 8-week coparenting intervention program, Understanding Dad™, on mothers' awareness and attitudes regarding how their relationships with fathers influence paternal involvement with children, knowledge of healthy pro-relationship skills, and relationship self-efficacy. Thirty-four mothers were recruited from four sites to participate in a study that used a pretest/posttest one-group design. Over the course of this 8-week program, mothers demonstrated moderate to large gains in each of the outcome measures, after controlling for mothers' educational level. Moreover, there was one significant within-subjects interaction effect for time × location. That is, mothers made significantly greater gains in pro-relationship knowledge in one of the intervention sites. Implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Coparenting; Gatekeeping; Responsible Fatherhood; Relationship Awareness

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Society is increasingly demanding that men who bear children assume an active, nurturing father role. A growing body of research literature has also documented the many factors that influence the extent to which fathers are involved with their children (Holmes & Huston, 2010). One factor that has received considerable attention by researchers and practitioners in recent years is the influence of the mother–father coparenting relationship. Though coparenting as a family process often extends beyond mothers and fathers (Baker, McHale, Strozier, & Cecil, 2010; Burton & Hardaway, 2012; McHale & Lindahl, 2011), in this paper we focus on coparenting as “the ways that parents work together in their roles as parents” (Feinberg, 2003, p. 1499). Mother–father coparenting may be especially relevant to fathers' involvement with children (Kulik & Tsoref, 2010; Waller, 2012).

Researchers have suggested that the quality of the coparenting relationship may be especially important among low-income families because fathers face a greater range of barriers to ongoing engagement with their children (Futris & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2007). Low-income fathers and mothers are at higher risk of divorce and marital and cohabitation separation (Roy & Smith, 2013). Low-income fathers are also more likely to have resided in separate households from their biological children since the birth of the child (Walker & McGraw, 2000). Fathers who do not reside with their children often do not have regular access to the child and are likely to rely more heavily on a positive coparenting relationship with the mother to stay involved with the child (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011).

*School of Social Work, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jay Fagan, 13th St. & Cecil B. Moore Ave., Philadelphia, PA 19122. E-mail: jfagan@temple.edu.

Currently, there are 120 federally funded responsible fatherhood and healthy marriage programs in the United States, with hundreds of other state-, county- and community-based fatherhood programs operating nationwide that target low-income unmarried fathers. Most programs include content that addresses coparenting challenges in these families, although the majority of these programs work directly with the father and do not include the mother (Klempin & Mincy, 2011–2012). Because mothers seem to play a pivotal role in facilitating the father–child relationship, especially in higher risk families (Arendell, 1996; Cannon, Shoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski, 2008), practitioners and program developers have suggested that interventions assist mothers in addressing their own attitudes and behaviors that influence the coparenting relationship (Pruett, Arthur, Barker, Brown, & Vecere, 2008).

One such program is the “Understanding Dad™” curriculum, which was created by the National Fatherhood Initiative®, a national nonprofit organization, after the organization’s staff found an increased demand for additional mother education programs as a result of the implementation by organizations of their “Mom as a Gateway™” workshop. The Mom as a Gateway™ program for low-income mothers focuses on the role of the gatekeeper, power and control in male–female relationships, and minimizing excessive gatekeeping. The overall goal of the Understanding Dad™ program is to improve the quality of the coparenting relationship between mothers and fathers for the sake of their children. This comprehensive education program for mothers focuses on three intervention components intended to improve coparenting, including mothers’ awareness of the quality of the relationship with the father (including their influence on fathers’ involvement with children), effective communication with the father, and conflict resolution. The present study examined the effects of Understanding Dad™ on mothers’ attitudes and awareness of the roles that they assume in influencing paternal involvement with children, mothers’ knowledge of pro-relationship skills with fathers (e.g., effective communication and conflict resolution), and mothers’ relationship self-efficacy.

Background

Researchers have suggested that maternal gatekeeping and facilitation are important parts of the coparenting relationship (Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, & Sokolowski, 2008). Walker and McGraw (2000) have observed that there is ample evidence suggesting that mothers actively facilitate fathers’ involvement with children. Others have found that some mothers exert considerable influence over fathers by engaging in gatekeeping behavior, that is, limiting fathers’ involvement with children (Barry, Smith, Deutsch, & Perry-Jenkins, 2011; Holmes, Dunn, Harper, Dyer, & Day, 2013). Researchers have observed that the highest levels of maternal gatekeeping and facilitation occur in families faced with risk factors such as single parenting or incarceration (Roy & Dyson, 2005).

The extent to which mothers support or do not support fathers’ involvement with children may be partially related to mothers’ beliefs about the role of fathers (Arendell, 1996; Schoppe-Sullivan & Mangelsdorf, 2013). In studies of co-residential parents, mothers with more liberal attitudes about the father’s role in parenting have husbands or partners who participate in more child care (Barnett & Baruch, 1987). Several studies reveal positive associations between the level of paternal involvement with children and mothers’ beliefs about the importance of the father role to children (De Luccie, 1995; Fagan, Newash, & Schloesser, 2000) and mothers’ nontraditional gender ideologies (Kulik & Tsoref, 2010). Together, these findings suggest that maternal attitudes may need to be addressed by community-based programs as a means to support fathers’ involvement with children. Based on findings of intervention studies demonstrating that relationship education

programs can have a positive result on women's attitudes about their partner relationships (Van Epp, Futris, Van Epp, & Campbell, 2008), the Understanding Dad™ curriculum includes content intended to: (1) increase mothers' awareness and to re-evaluate their attitudes about the father's role and (2) increase mothers' awareness of how their own family of origin impacts how they see fathers' roles and their relationships with fathers.

Mothers' support of paternal involvement with children may also be influenced by the couple's ability to address disagreements about parenting, manage conflict and hostile communications, and resolve problems that arise around coparenting. In essence, mothers and fathers need enhanced relationship skills as a means of ensuring that coparenting responsibilities are carried out effectively. Interventions created to address relationship skills positively affect relationship satisfaction and reduce conflict (Hahlweg & Richter, 2010; McHale, Salman-Engin, & Covert, 2015; Ragan, Einhorn, Rhoades, Markman, & Stanley, 2009). Given these potential outcomes, relationship skill enhancement for mothers may result in higher quality coparenting relationships between mothers and fathers.

The Understanding Dad™ curriculum includes sessions aimed at increasing mothers' knowledge and awareness of pro-relationship skills rather than skill development per se. An alternative view about couples' counseling suggests that partners already have the skills necessary to engage in healthy relationships, and instead they just need higher levels of awareness about relationships to engage effectively in relationship maintenance (Acitelli, 2001). Recently, Rogge, Cobb, Lawrence, Johnson, and Bradbury (2013) found that over a 3-year period of time, participants in a relationship awareness program had the same rate of relationship satisfaction as did participants in a skills program targeting management of conflict and conflict resolution. Thus, increasing mothers' relationship knowledge and awareness of healthy pro-relationship skills may be an important component of a community-based program.

One benefit from the acquisition of improved communication and relationship knowledge and awareness (or skills) is a sense of self-efficacy for mothers. Bandura (1997) suggests that self-efficacy beliefs affect motivation levels and acquisition of knowledge and skills. More recently, Lent and Lopez (2002) hypothesized that "individuals develop beliefs about the efficacy of other persons in interpersonal contexts, and these beliefs can influence whether they respond to others in supportive or discouraging ways" (pp. 260–261). A premise of the Understanding Dad™ curriculum is that through knowledge and increased awareness mothers will gain confidence around their communication and coparenting abilities. The present study therefore examines the degree to which mothers' participation in the Understanding Dad™ program is associated with an increased sense of relationship self-efficacy.

To summarize, the present study is an initial pilot feasibility study to evaluate effects of mothers' participation in an 8-week intervention program, Understanding Dad™, on mothers' relationship awareness, knowledge of healthy pro-relationship skills, and relationship self-efficacy. Because different group leaders may affect mothers differently, site location is examined as a between-group variable in analysis of program effects. As researchers find that effects of parenting interventions and prevention programs on families can be influenced by characteristics of parents such as parental education (Lundahl, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2006), the present study also controls for the effects of maternal education level on outcomes associated with participation in the program, Understanding Dad™.

METHOD

The present study employed a pretest/posttest one-group design. Thirty-four mothers were recruited from four urban community social service agency sites that had previously

partnered with the National Fatherhood Initiative® (developers of the curriculum, Understanding Dad™). These sites had experience implementing the three-session intervention workshop for low-income mothers called “Mom as a Gateway™” and had expressed interest in additional mother education programs that were more in-depth. One wave of Understanding Dad™ was conducted in each of the four sites: one in Ohio and three in Pennsylvania. All participants volunteered to take part in this program and were recruited through advertisements at the pilot sites. Anywhere from 6 to 10 mothers participated in each of the four program sites.

Participant Characteristics

The average age of the mothers in the Understanding Dad™ program was 34.5 years (*SD* = 11.3 years, range = 20–62 years, see Table 1). Thirty-two participants reported that they were the mother of their children; two reported not being the biological mother. The average age of the participants’ children was 2.29 years (range = 1–6 years). About 39% of the participants identified as being Black and the remaining 62% were White. Of the 34 participants, 35.3% were married, 38.2% were single or never married, 17.6% were divorced, and 8.8% were separated. Over half of the participants, 52.9%, completed high school or received their GED, 41.2% completed college, and the remaining 5.9% completed graduate school.

Procedures

The organizations that conducted the Understanding Dad™ program received a facilitator’s manual, DVD of videos used during sessions, workbooks for mothers in the program, and collateral materials to market the program. The eight-session program was conducted over eight consecutive weeks; each session was 2 hours in length. The first five sessions focused on the roles of mothers, the impact of one’s own father on self, the impact of one’s own mother on self, relationships with the fathers of their children, and connecting the impact of these various relationships on their children. The last three sessions were geared toward specific knowledge of healthy pro-relationship skills, such as building a foundation for effective communication by looking at patterns of communication, creating

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics (N = 34)

| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>M (SD)</i> |
|----------------------|----------|------|---------------|
| Mother’s age | | | 34.5 (11.3) |
| Mother type | | | |
| Biological | 32 | 94 | |
| Other mother | 2 | 6 | |
| Number of children | | | 2.29 (1.7) |
| Black | 13 | 38.2 | |
| White | 21 | 61.8 | |
| Level of education | | | |
| High School/GED | 18 | 52.9 | |
| College | 14 | 41.2 | |
| Graduate School | 2 | 5.9 | |
| Marital Status | | | |
| Married | 12 | 35.3 | |
| Single/never married | 13 | 38.2 | |
| Divorced | 6 | 17.6 | |
| Separated | 3 | 8.8 | |

an open and safe environment for communication, and learning how to effectively listen to their partner.

Each session included five to seven activities, including handbook work, discussion, presentation, and role play. Additionally, each session provided opportunities for mothers to gain relationship knowledge and awareness as well as to learn about relationship skills they could use in their daily lives. At the end of each session, the participants reviewed the material learned and answered a couple of skills and attitude-specific questions. Those questions were similar to those on the pre- and posttest survey and helped the facilitators to gauge the effectiveness of the session. The facilitators helped to guide the discussion and transmit important and relevant knowledge to the participants. During the first and last session, participants completed a questionnaire to assess the effectiveness of the program.

Each of the four sites that implemented Understanding Dad™ was co-facilitated by a male–female team. A total of six facilitators (three male and three female) conducted the program. The facilitators were all highly experienced in conducting parent education with mothers and fathers. They received 2 hours of training prior to implementing the curriculum.

Measures

The pretest and posttest questionnaires included 44 items to gauge mothers' pro-relationship knowledge, self-efficacy, and attitudes. The questions were designed by the creators of the program and are not standardized measures of knowledge, self-efficacy, or attitudes.

Pro-relationship knowledge

The knowledge items in the questionnaire included 14 multiple choice questions where there was only one correct answer. The questions were derived from the program curriculum. A sample question was, "The unrealistic expectations I have of my children's father are _____." There were seven potential responses to this question, including *his fault*, *my fault*, *no one's fault*, *fair*, *unfair*, *none of the above*, and *I'm not sure*. The correct answer was, *unfair*. Another example was, "What causes problems in communication between a mother and father over time?" with six potential answers, including *different communication styles*, *poor patterns of communication*, *they hate each other*, *they come from different backgrounds*, *none of the above*, and *I'm not sure*. The correct answer was *poor patterns of communication*. The total number of correct responses were summed to determine mothers' relationship knowledge at pretest and posttest.

Self-efficacy

This section was made up of 15 Likert scale items. All items began with the same question, "When things are not going well for me, I am confident I can..." Sample questions included, "Have a good relationship with the father of my children," "Get my point across to the father of my children," or "Let go of situations over which I have no control." Response options ranged from 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*. The scores for each item were reverse coded and summed to construct a composite of self-efficacy. Higher total composite demonstrated more confidence and self-efficacy, $\alpha_{\text{pretest}} = .88$, $\alpha_{\text{posttest}} = .90$.

Relationship attitudes and awareness

Participants were asked 15 Likert scale items about their attitudes and awareness regarding the roles that they assume in influencing paternal involvement. Sample items included, "A good mother has a good relationship with the father of her children," or "A good mother asks the father what he wants when she communicates with him." Response options ranged from 1 = *strongly agree* to 5 = *strongly disagree*. Similar to the

self-efficacy section, the scores for each item were reverse coded and summed to construct a composite of attitudes. Higher total scores demonstrated more positive attitudes about the role mothers assume in influencing fathers, $\alpha_{\text{pretest}} = .72$, $\alpha_{\text{posttest}} = .68$.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

A series of ANOVAs and chi-square analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between education level, race, and test location with respect to pretest results. Using one-way ANOVA, there were no significant differences found between education levels and the pretest measures for self-efficacy, $F(2, 33) = .06$, *ns*; attitudes $F(2, 33) = 2.77$, *ns*; or knowledge, $F(2, 33) = 2.58$, *ns*. The mothers with college or graduate school education scored higher on each of the composite measures than the mothers with a high school education, but the differences were not significant. There were no significant race/ethnicity or test location effects found for pretest survey results. There was a significant association between mothers' education and site location. Consequently, we included maternal education level as a covariate in subsequent analyses.

Effects of the Intervention

A repeated measures ANOVA examined whether there was a difference between the pre- and postintervention test results for mothers' self-efficacy, knowledge, and attitudes (see Table 2). Location was included as a between-factors variable, and mothers' education level was controlled. There were significant main effects for time (within-subjects effects) for self-efficacy, knowledge, and attitudes. The main effect for time on self-efficacy was $F(1, 32) = 8.14$, $p < .01$, with a large effect size, $\eta^2_p = .22$. The main effect for time on knowledge was $F(1, 32) = 35.3$, $p < .001$; the effect size was large, $\eta^2_p = .55$. The main effect for time on attitudes was $F(1, 32) = 5.73$, $p = .02$, with a moderate effect size, $\eta^2_p = .17$. No between-subjects location effects were found for the dependent variables. There was a within-subjects interaction for time \times location for knowledge, $F(1, 32) = 3.61$, $p = .03$, with an effect size, $\eta^2_p = .27$. There were no significant within-subjects interactions for time \times location for self-efficacy or attitudes.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that Understanding Dad™ is a promising curriculum that may have significant positive effects on mothers' pro-relationship knowledge,

TABLE 2
Repeated Measures ANOVA for Pretest and Posttest (N = 34)

| | Within-subjects effect | | | | | | Between-subjects effect | | | Within-subjects effect | | |
|---------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------|----------|------------|--|-------------------------|----------|------------|------------------------|----------|------------|
| | | | Time | | | | Location | | | Time \times Location | | |
| | Pre <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) | Post <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>) | <i>F</i> | <i>p</i> | η^2_p | | <i>F</i> | <i>p</i> | η^2_p | <i>F</i> | <i>p</i> | η^2_p |
| Self-Efficacy | 49.03 (10.4) | 57 (8.2) | 8.14 | .008 | .22 | | .66 | .58 | .06 | .32 | .81 | .03 |
| Knowledge | 4.71 (2.13) | 9 (3.3) | 35.37 | .000 | .55 | | 1.3 | .30 | .12 | 3.61 | .03 | .27 |
| Attitudes | 49.24 (8.11) | 54.38 (6.54) | 5.73 | .02 | .17 | | .71 | .55 | .07 | .94 | .44 | .09 |

ANOVA = analysis of variance. Maternal education was controlled.

self-efficacy, and attitudes regarding the roles that mothers assume in influencing paternal involvement. Over the course of this 8-week program, mothers demonstrated moderate to large gains in each of the outcome measures, after controlling for mothers' educational level. Moreover, there was one significant within-subjects interaction effect for time \times location. That is, mothers made significantly greater gains in pro-relationship knowledge in one of the intervention sites. This finding may be due to the quality of the group leaders in that intervention site. Research has shown that participants of parent education programs benefit to a greater extent when the group leader is more highly trained or more effective as a facilitator (Green & Documét, 2005).

It is significant to note that assessments of mothers' and fathers' actual coparenting behaviors were not included in this study. The present study only examined mothers' improved knowledge of healthy pro-relationship skills, attitudes about the role that mothers play in influencing paternal involvement with children, and relationship self-efficacy. Although there is research evidence suggesting that improved knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy are associated with more skillful mother-father coparenting relationships (Segrin & Taylor, 2006), we cannot conclude that the intervention program had positive effects on the coparenting relationship. We suggest that the program should be evaluated for such effects. For example, it would be worthwhile to evaluate whether participation in the program is associated with reduced gatekeeping behaviors. We also note that Understanding Dad™ is designed to influence coparenting at the level of the "individual parent." It would also be worthwhile to examine whether the program has an effect on mother-father dyadic coparenting interactions as well as triadic interactions (e.g., mother-father coparenting dynamics in the presence of the child; see McHale & Coates, 2014). It may be necessary to modify the intervention program to address mother-father coparenting behavior if there are no positive effects on skills associated with participation in this program.

Researchers have found that the effects of parent education programs on parents are often influenced by the parents' education level (Lundahl et al., 2006). This was not found to be the case in this study, suggesting that mothers of varying education levels may benefit from programs targeting knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy in coparenting relationships. Future studies of this program with larger samples and more rigorous research designs should continue to assess the influence of maternal education level on mothers' outcomes. Furthermore, the results of this study showed a within-subjects interaction effect for time and location. Unfortunately, the study did not collect data on the characteristics of the facilitators or the fidelity with which the program was implemented. Such nuanced analyses will be important to implementing more rigorous studies of Understanding Dad™.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was the absence of a control group to assess the impact of the intervention compared to a no intervention group. The use of a pretest/posttest only research design was deemed appropriate for a pilot study of a new curriculum that has not been previously evaluated. The small number of participants also limited power to detect differences and allow for more nuanced data analyses and limits generalizability of the findings. In addition, the study included only mothers who had either high school or college educations. The intervention may not be effective for use with mothers who have less than a high school education. The results also may be biased because the mothers who participated in the study agreed to participate as a result of their previous involvement with the agency. It is not clear how this sample of mothers differs from other mothers. It is possible that the mothers in this study were more highly committed to the fathers of their

children because they sought additional education programs. If that is the case, then the findings may be more representative of mothers with positive partner and coparenting relationships. However, the opposite might be true as well because the participating mothers may have needed greater assistance with maintaining positive relationships with the fathers of their children. Moreover, the survey did not use standardized measures, therefore, validity cannot be tested for the survey measures.

CONCLUSION

Understanding Dad™ is a new curriculum intended to assist mothers to be more knowledgeable, aware, confident, and skillful at engaging in coparenting relationships with their child's father. This pilot study showed that the participation of this small group of mothers in the program was associated with improved knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy, although the lack of a control group means that the impact of the intervention cannot be determined. The results using this small sample suggest that Understanding Dad™ is a promising new curriculum that should be more rigorously evaluated using a larger sample of mothers and employing a control group. The findings are also consistent with the idea that coparenting interventions may be effective when only one parent, and not both parents, attend the program. However, future evaluations should use more rigorous methods to assess whether programs are equally effective when only mothers are involved versus when mothers and fathers attend a program.

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