

CO-PARENT COURT: A PROBLEM-SOLVING COURT TO ESTABLISH PATERNITY, SUPPORT FAMILIES, AND STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES

Abstract

Co-Parent Court is an innovative problem-solving court in Hennepin County, Minnesota, which seeks to better meet the needs of unmarried co-parents who are establishing paternity. A 3 year, mixed method quasi-experimental design evaluation study was conducted on the outcomes of participation in Co-Parent Court with data collected at pre, post and follow-up. Outcomes examined for this article included child support payments and measures assessing attitudes about the importance of the role of fathers in a child's life. Findings included that child-support payments across groups was connected to a father's ability to pay at pre-survey and that a majority of both fathers and mothers reported that a father's involvement in the lives of his children went beyond an ability to pay child support.

Key Points for the Family Court Community

- Courts-Community agencies partnering to build a quality program for unmarried parents and their children.
- What types of community agencies are critical to provide a network of support for young, under-resourced, unmarried parents?
- What does it take to get unmarried parents to complete a multi-component intervention (education, case management and agreed upon parenting plan)?

Introduction

As the percentage of nonmarital births has increased across the country, states have been challenged to meet the need for innovative judicial interventions given the unique challenges of these nontraditional families. Since reaching a peak in 2009 at 41% nationally, the percentage of nonmarital births has since declined to 40.6% as of 2013 (Curtin, Ventura, & Martinez, [2014](#)). Minnesota is below the national average for percentage of nonmarital births at 30.7% with 14% of birth certificates with no listed father (Minnesota Department of Health, [2012](#); Shattuck & Kreider, [2013](#)). When a father is not on a birth certificate, he can establish paternity in two ways: (1) file for recognition of parenting jointly with the child's mother or (2) obtain a court order. If parents are unmarried, even if a father is listed on a birth certificate, a mother has sole custody until a court issues a custody order ([Minnesota Judicial Branch](#), Basics of Paternity). Of families needing to establish paternity, most (81%) establish paternity through a recognition of parenting process with the remaining (19%) using a court order (Child Support Enforcement Division, [2013](#)).

In larger, more urban counties of Minnesota, the percentage of nonmarital birth increases and is more comparable to national trends. Hennepin County is the largest metro county in Minnesota with over 22% of the state's population. It is also one of the most diverse (U.S. Census Bureau, [2013](#)). In Hennepin County, a third of women (33.2%) who gave birth in 2011 were unmarried, and 16.9% did not have a father listed on the birth certificate (Minnesota Department of Health, [2012](#)). Family court systems in Hennepin County were established to work with families going through divorce and separation with little resources devoted to these younger, unmarried co-parents who were also using family court to establish paternity and address issues of custody. Officials in the Hennepin County Family Court officials recognized the need to better meet the needs of these families, and began to take steps to understand how to do so.

In 2007, the Fourth Judicial District conducted a needs assessment survey of single parents who had a case on the child support and paternity calendars ($n = 167$). The survey found that a majority of these parents were relatively young (52% in their 20s or 30s), African American (61%), and had received a high school diploma (65%). About a third (34%) were unemployed and those who were working, were mostly working low-wage jobs ($M = \$12.81$). Respondents who were court ordered to pay child support said they struggled to make their payments. In addition, nearly half of the survey respondents indicated that they lacked stable housing; and one-quarter of all respondents (or one half of all male respondents) had a criminal record. Their criminal records consisted predominately of drug and assault related offenses (Podkopacz, Eckberg, Caron & Kubits, [2007](#)). Most survey respondents had children through multipartner fertility and characterized their relationship with their co-parents as “less than warm.” One third of all noncustodial single parent respondents said they would like to spend more time with their child, but only 10% had filed a parenting time petition with the court to do so. When survey respondents were asked about key supports they needed, they indicated that would benefit from education, employment, and childcare assistance (Podkopacz, Eckberg, Caron, & Kubits, [2007](#)). Following the needs assessment survey, stakeholders came together to develop what would become Co-Parent Court.

Co-Parent Court

Co-Parent Court is an innovative problem-solving model intended to better support unmarried parents who are summoned to family court in order to establish paternity. Typically these families enter family court because one of the parents, often the mother, has requested public assistance. According to the Minnesota Judicial Branch Web site, “if either parent receives public assistance for the child, the county attorney will start the paternity case on behalf of the public. The law allows for this so that the county can ask that the other parent be ordered to financially support his child” ([Minnesota Judicial Branch](#), Establish Paternity by Court Order). Prior to receiving the court order, some parents have already been co-parenting together while others have had little to no contact with one another. Therefore, the program was developed to provide “support and services to help unmarried parents develop the skills and knowledge to be involved parents—both financially and emotionally—and to develop a healthy co-parent relationship” (Co-Parent Court Program Model/Toolkit, [2014](#), p. 1).

Co-Parent Court is a partnership between the Family Court, the child support enforcement agency, and community service providers to serve unwed parents in the paternity system. During

the demonstration project, there was a single judge assigned to the Co-Parent Court project. Co-Parent Court hearings (initial, follow-up and final) were limited to a single day each week, scheduled on Thursdays, allowing the judge adequate time to continue work on other events on the court calendar. Key community partners included: a family strengthening and empowerment program as well as a fathering program that provided individual and family case management for mothers and fathers; a community-driven nonprofit law firm that provided mediation services; and crisis intervention programs that addressed issues related to healthy relationships, domestic violence, and anger management. The Co-Parent Court programmatic model is comprised of several key elements, each of which will be briefly described.

The first element is individualized assessment and attention throughout involvement in Co-Parent Court. “Co-Parent Court Navigators,” hereafter referred to as the “navigators,” meet with parents at court in order to identify needs and recommend appropriate referrals to relevant project partners (housing, jobs, child care, chemical dependency treatment, domestic violence assistance, etc.). The navigators remain in contact with parents and provide the judge with progress reports at follow-up court dates. The second component of the model is social services tailored to the needs of parents and children. Partnering community social service providers work closely with Co-Parent Court to provide case management and services tailored to clients referred from the program. There were two community-based programs, one for mothers and another for fathers, which provided case management for parents enrolled in Co-Parent Court. The family facilitator (for the mothers) and father advocate (for the fathers) met one-on-one with parents to help determine needs and connect them with supports and resources. These include assistance in self-empowerment and responsibility, domestic violence and safety, relationship development, education, employment, housing, chemical and mental health, and basic parenting and child development. Intensive case management services are provided to high need parents who express needs across many of the above mentioned areas.

The third element of the program model is a court mandated co-parent education program designed specifically for unmarried parents and fragile families. The co-parent education component seeks to develop co-parenting skills; improve parental relationships and communication, and encourage paternal participation in the lives of the children. It consisted of six sessions lasting two-hours or four sessions lasting three hours. The fourth component of the model is assistance with the establishment of a parenting plan following attendance at the co-parenting workshops. The parenting plan covers issues such as custody, parenting time, and decision making. The intention of the parenting agreement is for parents to determine on their own the arrangements that will best suit their family's circumstances. The parenting agreement is then adopted by the court as a legally binding document. If parents cannot agree on a joint parenting plan, they are referred to conflict resolution services that assists high conflict parents in the development of their parenting plans. If the individualized mediation and family group conferencing cannot assist parents to complete the parenting plan together, they will continue to final hearing at Co-Parent Court at which time the Judge will adopt a default child support and custody arrangement. Finally, supportive services are provided to help stabilize and support parents enrolled in the program. Supportive services are typically resources that allow parents to participate in the program. These services include transportation to and from the workshops, childcare during the workshops, or resources that supplement the social services being received,

such as purchase of work clothes for a job interview. Additionally, when circumstances require, assistance with rent and utilities are provided.

Description of the Evaluation

The stakeholders behind Co-Parent Court partnered with the University of Minnesota Extension Family Development Research and Evaluation team to conduct and manage the evaluation component of the project. This study employed a quasi-experimental, mixed methods design, indicating that both qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analyzed separately with the intent to merge the results of these data analyses at the end (Creswell, [2015](#)). For the purposes of the quasi-experimental design, cases ordered to establish paternity were randomly assigned into either the control (traditional court) or intervention (co-parent court) groups. The eligibility criteria used to determine whether a case was a candidate for Co-Parent Court included: both parents were at least 18 years of age, there were no active child welfare cases or existing order of protection against the other parent, parents lived within a certain geographic area determined by zip codes, and no interpreter was necessary. Once eligible cases had been identified, assignment was conducted by Principal Support Services Supervisor who used a random numbers table developed by the university evaluation team. Each case was randomly assigned a number and the number would determine whether that case would be in the control or intervention group. Once eligible cases had been assigned into either the control (traditional court) or intervention (Co-Parent Court), parents in each case were sent documents ordering them to appear in court. Those in the control group were ordered to appear at the traditional paternity establishment court held every Tuesday and those assigned to the intervention group received an order to appear in Co-Parent Court held each Thursday. The design was quasi-experimental because the Judge had leeway to move select participants into the intervention group as designated referee referrals.

The quasi-experimental survey design employed in this study included three data collection instances: pre (prior to the intervention), post (approximately six months following the intervention) and follow-up (at least a year following completion of the intervention).

Figure 1 displays the intervention mixed methods design used in this study. This article reports selected data on the completion of court-mandated interventions and its connection to improved child support payments, one of the targeted outcomes of Co-Parent Court.

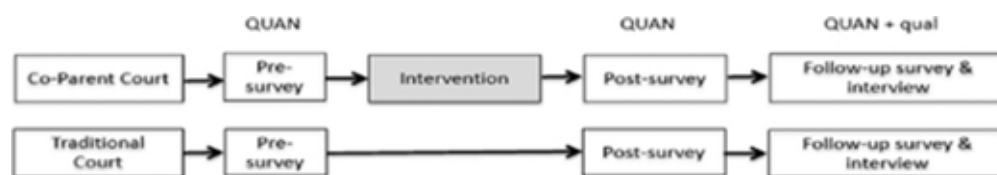


Figure 1

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Co-Parent Court Intervention Mixed Method Design.

Method

Procedure

Graduate research assistants working on the evaluation team conducted data collection with both the control and intervention group. The control group participants were approached by the graduate assistants at Family Court as they were awaiting their paternity case to be heard. The intervention group was approached about participation in the study at the first two co-parent education workshops. The project was explained and if participants elected to participate in the study, they signed a consent form. It should be noted that nearly all parents in both study conditions agreed to participate when approached by the research team. In fact, we can recall no cases in which both members of the dyad declined to participate. Only those participants who signed a consent form were considered enrolled in the study. After consent had been signed, participants completed the pre-survey. All pre-survey data was completed by the individual, so each case consists of a mother and father survey, if both agreed to participate in the study, and were collected via “paper and pen.” Upon completion of the survey, participants received a \$25 gift card to a large retail store as a “thank you” for their participation. Data was entered from the surveys into SPSS for later analysis. The hard copies were then filed for data quality checks and security purposes.

Participants were contacted to complete a post-survey six to nine months after the pre-survey was administered to them. Due to the rolling enrollment nature of this project, control cases were “matched” with intervention cases to account for the differential amount of time that intervention participants spent being actively involved in the program. This was an attempt to maintain similarity in data collection timeframes for participants in the control and intervention groups. Participants were contacted most often via the telephone (this was the most successful method of contact) and occasionally sent letters when a working phone number was not available. Participants were given the option either to complete the survey in person or online. Remark, secure web survey software, was used to collect survey data online. Participants who chose to complete the survey online were sent an e-mail with a link to the survey and their identification code. As an incentive to complete the survey in-person, the participant was given a \$30 gift card on the spot and anyone who completed the survey online was mailed a \$30 gift card. The follow-up survey and interview were scheduled approximately six months after the post survey had been completed (at least a year after signing consent). Again the online option was also available for the follow-up survey and a phone interview. A \$40 gift card was offered upon completion of the follow up survey and interview.

Participants

The Co-Parent Court enrolled 709 participants representing both mothers and fathers across three groups: control ($n = 208$), intervention ($n = 454$), and referee referral ($n = 47$). A concern throughout the project was the predominance of participants who were enrolled in the intervention group despite the use of a randomization process. There were multiple instances of court and other project staff carefully tracking the randomization process to ensure that randomization was occurring properly. When no errors in the process were detected, the project partners had ongoing discussions about the cause of the difference. The difference in the size of

the two groups appears to be due to the substantially higher rate of no-shows at the Tuesday court (traditional court attended by parents in the control group) as compared with the Co-Parent Court on Thursdays. Project partners have posited that some of this may be due to the more understandable, friendly language in the Co-Parent brochure that was sent to parents in the intervention group, as compared with the intimidating language used in the normal appearance order that was sent to parents in the traditional court. Another possible reason for the difference in appearance rates is word-of-mouth communication about the Co-Parent Court in the tight-knit community where many project participants lived. Without a clear explanation for this difference, readers should interpret the results with some caution.

At enrollment, the majority of participants were African American (72.4%) and between the ages of 18 and 35 (85.2%). While most (82.8%) had at least a high school diploma, GED, or a higher level of education, the unemployment rate was high (52.2%) and 56.8% of participants reported receiving public assistance. Nearly all (94.5%) were living apart from the co-parent and most (80.3%) had only one child with their co-parent. Over half of parents (54.9%) had more than one child under age 18, and nearly all had never been married (90.5%). The average age of the child at the time parents were being enrolled in Co-Parent Court was 3.51 years. Over 80% of the children at the time of Co-Parent Court enrollment were age 5 and younger.

Measures

A modified eight-item version of the Role of the Father Questionnaire (ROFQ; Palkovitz, [1984](#)) was used to measure attitudes toward the father's role. Items are written on a five-point Likert scale with a range of 1 = "Strongly Disagree" to 5 = "Strongly Agree". A single item, "The most important thing a man invests into his family is time and energy" was used to highlight the father's role. This item was selected because it provides a strong contrast to the primary financial outcome of the study- child support payment behavior. A father's income was measured using the question "What is your total income (gross income) before taxes in the past month?" at pre-survey. A father's employment status was measured using the question "What is your work status" with the options of "Working full-time," "Working part-time," and "Not working for pay." Public assistance was measured using the question "Are you currently receiving public assistance" with the answers of "Yes" and "No".

Child support data was collected monthly between June 2010 and August 2013 by the child support agency in Hennepin County. The data was limited to monthly child support owed and paid. The ratio of total child support paid to child support owed over the project year was used to measure payment behavior. This ratio, known as payment performance, is the key outcome measure tracked by local, state, and federal child support agencies. One advantage of using a performance ratio to measure payment behavior is that it is not affected by differences in the number of months that participants are required to pay child support and their order levels. Sums for each year were used to compare control participants to intervention and referee referral participants the year after they enrolled into the Co-Parent Court. Data was available for all participants. Given that Co-Parent Court targeted paternity establishment cases, child support payments prior to enrollment in Co-Parent Court were not applicable for many of the participants, and thus not collected for this study.

Completion of the Co-Parent Court interventions such as education and receipt of support services were tracked through a performance management system. All partners, including the courts, navigators, and service agencies were trained to enter relevant data and make/accept referrals that in essence created a “dashboard” for each parent with dates of completion for key program components.

Analysis

To examine differences in the proportion of child support paid, two analyses were performed. First, all participants who were assigned to the intervention condition (i.e., referee referral and intervention) were compared to control participants using linear regression. Next, all who completed the intervention (attended at least four classes in six-session group, or at least three classes in four-session group) were compared to non-completers. These analyses were performed in order to identify if there were differences in results among completers, versus being assigned to a condition. Models comparing intervention and control adjusted for father's employment status, public assistance status, and gross monthly personal income at time of study entry. This adjustment was included to account for differences between intervention and control participants not removed by randomization and to increase the precision of estimates. Yearly data was analyzed separately for participants during 2011, 2012, and 2013 to identify differences in results over time. As a portion of participants in the intervention condition did not complete the classes or the parenting plan, it was important to explore the data by those who completed the intervention components and those who did not. To compare completers and non-completers, intervention participants from all years were pooled together, and regression models were not adjusted. Analyses of categorical variables and the co-parent court differences in the role of the father question were analyzed using chi-squared (χ^2) statistics. Data management and analysis was conducted using Stata 13.

Results

Given the high-risk population served through the Co-Parent Court, a critical question was whether participants would complete the intervention components as intended. The following describes rates of completion. Where appropriate, differences by gender and other key factors are explored.

Co-Parenting Education

The original curriculum was designed as six 2-hour sessions. During a steering committee meeting held during the first project year, the navigators, as well as community partners, advocated for changing the session frequency (not dosage) to four 3-hour sessions. It was believed that this would reduce hardship on parents and better accommodate their ability to look for employment and/or attend school. Completion rates are reported separately for those attending six and four sessions. Parents were counted as “completers” if they attended at least four out of six or three out of four sessions. Results indicate that a majority of parents completed the co-parent education component. As noted in Table [1](#), among mothers, 167 (78%) completed the sessions and 47 did not; 140 (69%) fathers completed classes and 62 did not. Mothers

completed classes at a statistically significantly higher rate ($\chi^2 = 4.09, p = 0.04$) than fathers, however nearly 80% of mothers and 70% of fathers completed classes. While completion rates differed between mothers and fathers, there was no statistical difference in completion rates between four-session and six-session classes ($\chi^2 = 0.003, p = 0.96$).

Table 1. Session Attendance and Completion by Gender and Number of Sessions

	Mothers		Fathers		4-session		6-session	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Completed	167	78.04	140	69.31	218	72.19	89	78.07
Not Completed	47	21.96	62	30.69	84	27.81	25	21.93
Total	214	100.00	202	100.00	302	100.00	114	100.00

Developing A Joint Parenting Plan

The majority of co-parents (57%) agreed to their parenting plans, however at the time of data collection, nearly half (43%) did not agree to their parenting plans. It should be noted that of the 43% without an agreed upon parenting plan, only 4 (1%) could not reach a parenting plan. At the time of this data collection, the remaining participants were still working on coming up with a parenting plan, with most eventually completing a parenting plan with support from mediation services and/or additional supports from the navigators. Reporting rates of agreement did not statistically differ between mothers and fathers ($\chi^2 = 0.15, p = 0.70$), nor did they differ by number of sessions of co-parent education attended ($\chi^2 = 1.26, p = 0.26$).

Wraparound Support Services

Partnering community organizations offered critical services to parents through intensive case management, incidental supports, and mediation. Over the tenure of the project, 400 referrals were made on behalf of parents in the intervention group. Figure 2 offers a breakdown of the types of referrals by gender. Most mothers were referred for intensive case management, parenting plan completion, and housing services while fathers were primarily referred for intensive case management, parenting plan completion and employment services. Domestic violence referrals were made for 14 mothers and three fathers and comprised 4.25% of the 400 referrals for services.

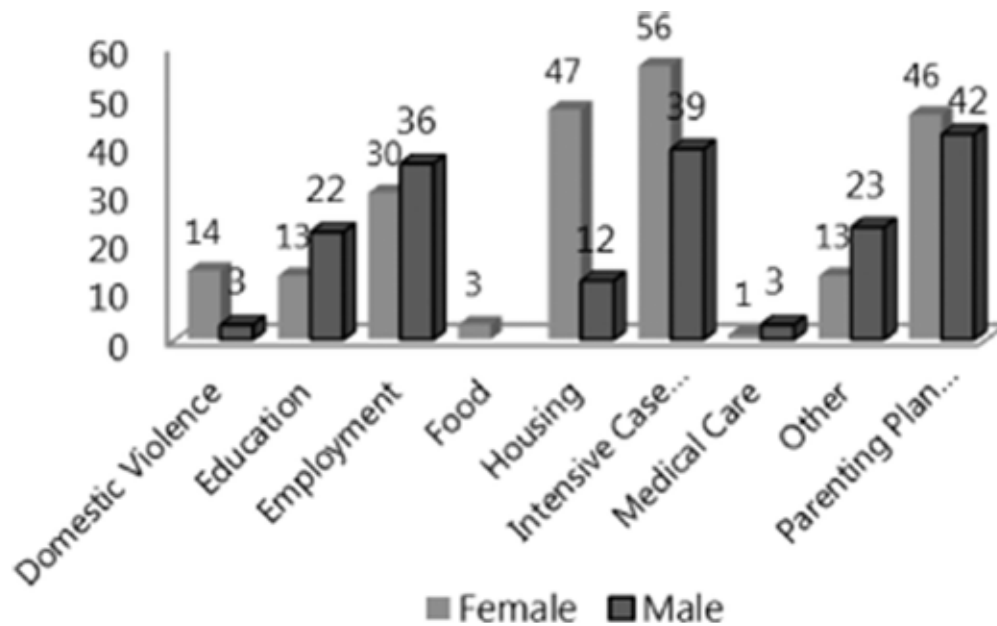


Figure 2
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Number of Types of Referrals by Gender (based on 400 total referrals).

Child Support Payment

An important outcome that the court hoped to see was an increase in child support payments made by noncustodial fathers. Data provided by the Office of Child Support Enforcement indicate that overall, fathers in the intervention condition paid at a slightly higher percentage of total child support owed than those in the control condition across the three years of the project (see Table 2).

Table 2. Percentage of Total Child Support Paid from What was Owed

Project Year	Intervention	Control
2011	84%	80%
2012	77.15%	74.6%
2013	72.8%	69.35%

After accounting for pre-survey differences in employment status, public assistance, and monthly personal income, there was no statistically significant difference between intervention and control fathers with respect to payment performance although intervention fathers paid slightly more child support than did fathers in the control condition. Rather, results of this regression model indicate that monthly personal income at baseline was the strongest predictor of rate of child support payment, regardless of intervention assignment, with higher personal incomes predicting statistically significantly higher rates of child support payment from 2011 to 2013 (Table 3).

Table 3. Regression Results for Co-Parent Court Effect on Child Support, by Year

2010–2011	Coef.	SE	95% Conf. Interval
Intervention/control status	–0.06	0.12	–0.30, 0.18
Income**	0.03	0.01	0.02, 0.05
Employment Status†			
<i>Not Working</i>	–0.28	0.20	–0.69, 0.14
<i>Working part-time</i>	0.03	0.13	–0.24, 0.30
Public Assistance	–0.14	0.16	–0.47, 0.19
2011–2012	Coef.	SE	95% CI
Intervention/control status	–0.02	0.11	–0.24, 0.21
Income	0.01	0.01	–0.01, 0.03
Employment Status†			
<i>Not working</i>	–0.24	0.18	–0.61, 0.13
<i>Working part-time</i>	0.06	0.13	–0.22, 0.33
Public Assistance	–0.03	0.16	–0.35, 0.29
2012–2013	Coef.	SE	95% CI
Intervention/control status	–0.06	0.07	–0.20, 0.08
Income *	0.01	0.004	0.00, 0.02
Employment Status†			
<i>Not working</i>	–0.07	0.10	–0.30, 0.16
<i>Working part-time</i>	0.02	0.11	–0.19, 0.24

2012–2013	Coef.	SE	95% CI
Public Assistance	−0.01	0.004	−0.22, 0.19

- Models were adjusted for father's employment status, monthly personal gross income, race and ethnicity, and public assistance status at time of presurvey. Income predictions per 100 dollar increase in father's personal monthly income.
- $*p < 0.05$; $**p < 0.01$.
- †Fathers who were not working and working part time were compared to fathers working full time.

Important to note, however, is that the null result of Co-Parent Court changes when examining intervention completion. When exploring child support payments by those who completed the intervention (attended minimum number of classes and developed a parenting plan), completers are paying at a significantly higher rate child support than those in the control group (Table 4).

Table 4. Percentage of Total Child Support Amount Paid from What Was Owed (2013)*

	Child support amount owed	Child support amount paid	Total % paid
Control Group	\$140,157.59	\$97,202.17	69.35%
Total Intervention Group (IG)	\$276,004.65	\$200,893.38	72.8%
IG where moms completed intervention	\$159,903	\$130,853.79	81.8%
IG where dads completed intervention	\$120,569.34	\$103,112.79	85.5%
IG when both mom and dad (with shared child) completed intervention	\$83,139	\$72,148.73	86.78%

- *Given the rolling enrollment of participants throughout the duration of the project, 2013 was selected for analysis as nearly all participants had been enrolled and completed the intervention components at this point in the project.

While this result is intriguing, interpretation is difficult without knowing the preintervention child support payment patterns (which did not exist for many of the parents who were newly establishing paternity). Among fathers who were assigned to Co-Parent Court, completers, on average, paid 21.22% more of their total child support owed than non-completers. It may be that more responsible fathers are more likely to complete classes and also pay child support. Because the data does not allow us to pull out comparable “less responsible” fathers from control cases, the result also cannot be compared with fathers in control cases.

Role of the Father

Among both mothers and fathers, the overwhelming majority agreed or strongly agreed that the most important thing a father invests in his family is his time and energy (Figures 3 and 4). At baseline, there was a marginally statistically significant difference between intervention and control mothers, with more intervention mothers disagreeing with this viewpoint (Figure 4). At the time of post-survey, however, this difference was no longer there. Very few (9%) fathers disagreed that time and energy is a father's most important investment during pre-survey, and no fathers disagreed with this statement at post-survey (Figure 3).

Statement: "The most important thing a man invests in his family is his time and energy."

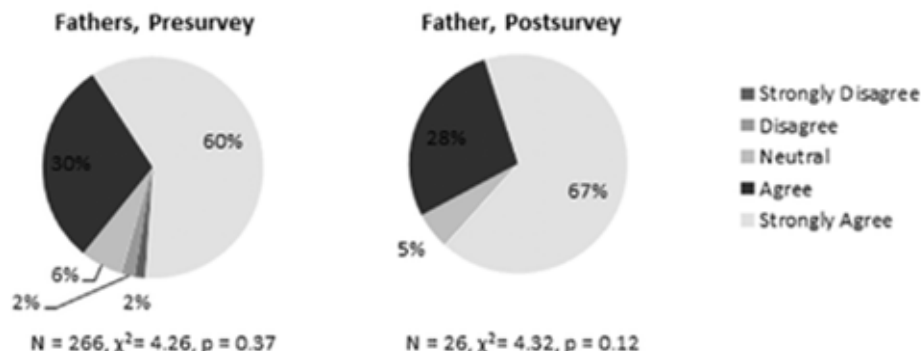


Figure 3

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Role of the Father among Fathers.

Statement: "The most important thing a man invests in his family is his time and energy."

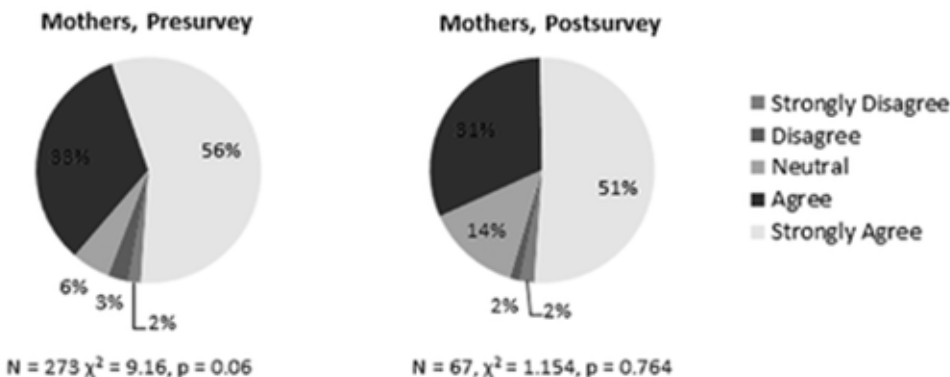


Figure 4

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Role of the Father among Mothers.

Discussion

The Co-Parent Court utilizes a judicial problem-solving model to support unmarried parents to develop the skills and knowledge to be involved parents—both financially and emotionally. The fact that the Co-Parent Court project was embedded in a family court was an important aspect of the project. The court played a critical role in getting the participants to attend the program and was able to encourage participation in ways that are unavailable to community-based programs. Given the many stressors that participants experienced (e.g., unemployment and underemployment, low levels of education, criminal records, lack of housing), it was a surprise to many of the partners who had extensive experience working with this population that an overwhelming majority of parents (69% of fathers and 78% of mothers) completed court-ordered classes and generated a parenting plan together.

While the results of the analysis of child support payments were somewhat mixed and differences between the groups were not statistically significant, fathers in the intervention condition paid their total child support obligations at a slightly higher level than did the fathers in the control condition at each of the 3 years of the project. While this behavior may be due to a confounding factor such as a greater overall sense of responsibility, it is promising that the fathers who completed co-parent education classes and parenting plans were paying 21% more of the total child support that they owed as compared with fathers who did not complete the intervention.

Validating what is known to many of those who work with unmarried parents, the single best predictor of child-support payments across study conditions was the father's ability to pay at baseline, as measured by his employment status and income level. When this finding became more evident during the course of the project, the Co-Parent Court Project steering committee responded by paying greater attention to job and education supports for fathers. While anecdotal evidence was offered by project partners about the impact of these added efforts, given that this occurred during the last year of the project, it had not yet resulted in a significant increase in employment status for fathers. Future programs that seek to improve child support payments through parenting time and co-parenting interventions should be attentive to the employment needs of fathers and collaborate with workforce programs.

Another important finding from this project was the steadfast belief by both fathers and mothers in the importance of the role of fathers in their children's lives from baseline to postsurvey. This result was reinforced by the parents during follow-up interviews. The majority of parents spoke of the importance of father involvement in the lives of their children and indicated that involvement went beyond an ability to pay child support. They stressed that it was critical for fathers to be emotionally present in the lives of their children. Both mothers and fathers agreed that any intervention to improve father involvement must work to enhance quality of life issues for fathers, including employment, housing, and mental health supports.

The importance of the Co-Parent Court community partners, then, cannot be overstated. While the court helped to ensure that parents attended the co-parenting classes, the fact that the educational navigators were employed by a trusted community-based agency rather than the

court was important in getting continued buy-in from parents. Parents appreciated the individual case management and information about other community resources that they received and recognized that they that they may not have had access to them had they not been a part of the Co-Parent Court project.

The research also sheds some empirical light on the salience of domestic violence issues for unmarried parents in court education and co-parenting interventions. While parents who had a no-contact order were excluded from participating in the Co-Parent Court, participants may have had a history of domestic violence. Thus, domestic violence was a key concern at the inception of this project. Early on, advocates on the steering committee expressed concern that few parents were being referred to existing domestic violence services. This concern was addressed by having advocates from two local domestic abuse organizations attend the initial co-parent court hearing. Domestic violence advocates continued to be a major partner throughout duration of the project. They were available during court hearings but they also attended at least one educational workshop to discuss domestic violence and provide resources. Additionally, participants could attend individual or group services offered by community-based organizations to address any domestic violence they were experiencing. Having domestic violence advocates involved in the beginning and throughout the project was important for alleviating concerns and addressing domestic violence at every step. It also provided participants the help that they may have needed but were not aware of the services available. The finding that fewer than 5% of total referrals were made for domestic violence even with all these steps suggests that co-parenting services can be used with unmarried child support populations and that domestic violence is not an overwhelming barrier.

The Co-Parent Court project was a pilot effort involving critical partnerships between the court and community agencies. The steering committee placed a high premium on making continuous improvements along the way with an eye toward improving conditions for unmarried parents and their children. While changes and variation along the way made the study condition more difficult, it has resulted in the partnership developing a sound model for future replication.

Biographies

- Dr. Mary S. Marczak directs the Applied Research and Evaluation unit at the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Family Development. Dr. Marczak has evaluated over 70 family and youth programs including national and statewide initiatives as well as local programs run by small, non-profit organizations. Her current evaluation studies focus on effective youth and family program practices and effective practices for working in traditionally underserved communities. She served as the lead evaluator of the Co-Parent Court Project, an innovative collaboration among court, county, university and community resources to provide comprehensive services to low income, unmarried parents establishing paternity. Dr. Marczak holds a B.A. in Psychology and a Ph.D. in Families Studies and Human Development at the University Arizona, Tucson.
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