

Father-inclusive evaluation: reflections for researchers & program designers

Robust evaluations of father engagement in parenting interventions and the impact on child or family outcomes are undermined by the ways in which most programs are designed and delivered: for instance, few disaggregate 'father' or 'couple' in their evaluations, being mostly driven by a focus on the mother-child dyad. Here are eight issues that need to be addressed if an evaluation is successfully to determine the relevance and sustainability of a program to ALL parents, to family and individual functioning and to child outcomes.

STEP 1: UNDERSTAND WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT. A growing evidence base suggests that (a) many programs that claim effectiveness with 'parents' are not, in fact, very effective with fathers; (b) delivering interventions to both parents significantly improves outcomes; and (c) mothers participating alone may fail to 'cascade' learning to fathers, especially when their relationship is under strain.

STEP 2: ENSURE COMMITMENT OF RESOURCES to recruit significant numbers of fathers into the intervention, monitor their participation and follow them up in evaluation.

STEP 3: ENSURE REACH. Is the team running the intervention trained in, and committed to, reaching and engaging all significant caregivers, including fathers and other individuals beyond just mothers? If not, they are unlikely to attract or retain sufficient fathers for gender-disaggregated evaluation to be viable.

STEP 4: DESIGN YOUR DATA COLLECTION so that information collected from and about 'parents' is collected from both mothers and fathers and disaggregated by sex. Identify co-parents among mixed groups of participants.

STEP 5: PROCESS: RECRUITMENT & ATTENDANCE. Are both mothers and fathers explicitly informed and individually reminded about the importance of program participation and benefits to children? Is participation of both monitored? Are both followed-up in cases of non-attendance? Are non-participating partners contacted and reasons for non-participation explored – with gender and other father-relevant factors (such as co-residence with child, employment patterns and commitments to children in other households) recorded?

STEP 6: PROCESS: DELIVERY. Is 'home-work' expected of both parents and separately recorded? Is any between-session facilitator-contact made with both parents? Where referrals are appropriate, are male as well as female parents directed to and accepted by relevant health, education and other services?

STEP 7: IMPACT. Is impact disaggregated by sex-of-parent and by couple vs. individual parent participation? Does this disaggregated impact assessment include equality (outcomes for the most disadvantaged) and prevention and reduction of problematic outcomes related to parenting and family functioning? Are child outcomes in health, education, psychosocial development and/or exposure to violence and maltreatment addressed and disaggregated by sex of child?

STEP 8: SUSTAINABILITY Is there commitment to policies, resources, activities and outcomes lasting beyond the program's timeframe? Is the cost-benefit for children, mothers, fathers, communities and societies demonstrated? Does this include estimation of the cost of failing to engage with fathers/other co-parents? What provision is there for dissemination of findings and replication in other settings?

EXAMPLE 1: GOOD PRACTICE. The Irish Research Council requires applicants for funding to submit a written statement demonstrating consideration of gender dimensions in any proposed work, in relation to both men and women.

EXAMPLE 2: BAD PRACTICE. In Australia, a meta-analysis found a large positive effect of a Behavioral Parent Training program ('Triple P'). However, when effect sizes were calculated separately for mothers and fathers it was found that the program had a significantly greater effect on improving mothers' parenting practices than fathers' parenting practices.

To download other 'Bringing fathers in' resources and access relevant links and references, go to: www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2014/bringing-fathers-in-resources-for-advocates-practitioners-and-researchers/