



MEASURING OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN OF FATHERHOOD PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Tips for Fatherhood Practitioners, Researchers, and Policy Makers

Travis Reginal and Paige S. Thompson | Urban Institute¹

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INTRODUCTION

A growing body of research demonstrates the important role fathers play in the lives of their children; however, it is difficult to accurately measure child well-being and determine any links between the participation of fathers in fatherhood programs and benefits for the well-being of their children.

Fatherhood programs are designed to support fathers in becoming more engaged and effective parents, with the ultimate goal of improving child well-being. To achieve this goal, programs often include components designed to strengthen parenting skills, promote economic stability, and enhance relationship and coparenting skills.

This National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse information brief:



CONSIDERS THE IMPORTANCE

of measuring outcomes that focus on children's well-being



DEFINES AND EXPLORES

domains of child well-being that can be measured to indicate outcomes for children whose fathers participate in fatherhood programs



OFFERS TIPS

for fatherhood practitioners and researchers interested in measuring outcomes for the children of fatherhood program participants



IMPORTANCE OF MEASURING OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

Understanding Program Impact

- 1 Measuring various aspects of a child's development—including emotional well-being, academic performance, and social behavior—can help practitioners, researchers, and policy makers understand the impact of a fatherhood program on child well-being.
- 2 Gathering data on child well-being outcomes can help developers and operators of fatherhood programs pinpoint which program elements are most beneficial for the children of program participants. As is the case for all program evaluations, data helps programs identify areas for improvement, refine their approach, and maximize positive effects.
- 3 Demonstrating strong evidence of positive outcomes for children can help programs secure additional funding and ensure sustainability.

Informing Policy and Practice

- 1 Measuring outcomes for children of fatherhood program participants will build the knowledge base of evidence-based solutions, inform broader policy decisions, and support the development of similar programs.
- 2 Building on an increased knowledge base, successful programs can be replicated and adapted in other communities and potentially lead to wider positive impacts for children.



KEY OUTCOMES: FIVE MEASURABLE DOMAINS OF CHILD WELL-BEING

CHILD WELL-BEING OUTCOMES IN THE CONTEXT OF FATHERHOOD PROGRAMMING

In this section, we consider ways to define and measure child well-being that are most applicable to the work of responsible fatherhood programs. The [FRAMING Research](#) (Fatherhood, Relationships, and Marriage – Illuminating the Next Generation of Research) project has identified five key domains of child well-being that may be impacted by parents' participation in Responsible Fatherhood and Healthy Relationship Education programs.²



PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH (MENTAL HEALTH AND BEHAVIOR)



EVALUATING self-esteem, happiness, anxiety, and depression levels of children can help practitioners, researchers, and policy makers understand the impact fatherhood programs may have on the emotional and mental health of program participants' children.



ASSESSING behaviors such as aggression, self-regulation, and conduct problems can reveal changes associated with increased father involvement. Research has indicated that children's psychological health may be a reflection of the state of their relationship with their parents (Martin et al., 2017; Davies & Woitach, 2008).

TIPS FOR MEASURING PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH OF CHILDREN

Gathering intake data from fatherhood program participants and following up with other family members could provide indicators of children's psychological health and identify early intervention needs for children who may be struggling emotionally.

Collecting pre- and post-program data could showcase areas where children are flourishing emotionally and indicate possible program impacts.

EXAMPLES OF VARIABLES THAT COULD BE MEASURED

- Feelings of belonging, distress, enjoyment.
- Healthy living, resilience, responsiveness.
- Social behavior.

² The key domains are described in more detail in Cavadel et al., 2023, which drew on longstanding research from Pollard & Lee (2003) and Hutson (2002).



SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

(RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS)



STRONG FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS may be linked to better social skills and peer relationships in children. Having strong social skills is essential for success in school, work, and life in general (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013.)



EQUIPPING FATHERS with better communication, coparenting, and conflict resolution skills is often an aim of fatherhood programs. These skills can translate to positive changes in father-child interactions, fostering stronger family bonds (Young et al., 2021).

TIPS FOR MEASURING CHILDREN'S SOCIAL SKILLS AND STRENGTH OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEERS AND FAMILY

Observing a child's social competencies and interactions with peers can highlight their ability to form and maintain relationships.

Observing parent-child interactions and family dynamics can reflect a program's impact on family relationships.

EXAMPLES OF VARIABLES THAT COULD BE MEASURED

- Number of conversational turns a child makes with peers, how often a child asks questions, how often a child offers information spontaneously, how often the child makes appropriate eye contact.
- Presence of family cohesion and/or conflict.
- Family expressiveness, family stability, family emotional support, supportive communication with parents.



ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES

(FAMILY INCOME AND MATERIAL WELL-BEING)



EMPLOYMENT BARRIERS faced by fathers are addressed by many fatherhood programs. When fathers have better employment opportunities and earning potential, it can lead to a more secure financial environment for their children, which can in turn affect children's feelings of well-being.

TIPS FOR MEASURING FAMILY INCOME AND MATERIAL WELL-BEING

Tracking economic outcomes allows programs to see if they are effectively equipping fathers with the skills and resources needed to improve their economic standing, ultimately benefiting their children.

EXAMPLES OF VARIABLES THAT COULD BE MEASURED

- Income, education, occupational status, employment security.
- Food security/insecurity, housing status, or home ownership.
- Overall quality of life, family assets, and investments.



COGNITIVE SKILLS

(PROBLEM SOLVING AND ACADEMIC SKILLS)



FOCUSING ON improving fathers' parenting skills and helping them strengthen relationships with their children, may indirectly affect the cognitive skills of program participants' children.

TIPS FOR MEASURING COGNITIVE SKILLS

Researchers working with fatherhood programs could seek permission from parents and schools for access to school records in order to gauge academic performance and school engagement.

A more elaborate research design could seek parents' permission for their children to respond to questions designed to measure their problem solving and academic skills.

EXAMPLES OF VARIABLES THAT COULD BE MEASURED

- **Academic Performance:** Measuring grades, standardized test scores, and overall academic achievements could help assess how father involvement influences children's learning.
- **School Attendance and Engagement:** Tracking attendance records and participation in school activities could provide insight into the child's engagement with education.
- **Problem Solving and Academic Skills:** Conducting testing with children at different time intervals could identify any changes in these skills areas.



PHYSICAL HEALTH

(PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, NUTRITION)



INCLUDING COMPONENTS ON HEALTHY LIVING (e.g., good nutrition, regular physical exercise, good sleep habits) in fatherhood programs could impact children's physical health by encouraging fathers to engage in physical activities with their children and serve as positive role models for healthy engagement in physical activity.



HELPING FATHERS IMPROVE THEIR MENTAL HEALTH may in turn affect children's mental health and physical health. (Mental and physical health are connected. Stress can have physical impacts on children; thus, having supportive parents can indirectly have a positive effect on children's physical health.)

TIPS FOR MEASURING FAMILY PHYSICAL HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Researchers working with fatherhood programs could conduct interviews with parents (mothers and fathers) and their children to obtain information on healthy living habits in the household(s) and engagement of children in physical activities.

A more elaborate research design could include questions focused on the mental health of parents and children.

EXAMPLES OF VARIABLES THAT COULD BE MEASURED

- Type and frequency of physical activities engaged in.
- Sleeping habits (average hours of sleep, noise level of household).
- Access to affordable health care.
- Typical diet (e.g., daily meals, snacks, nutritional content).
- General health and wellness.

TIPS FOR MEASURING OUTCOMES FOR THE CHILDREN OF FATHERHOOD PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

Finding ways to demonstrate evidence of positive outcomes for children of fathers who participate in fatherhood programs can help programs demonstrate program effectiveness, secure additional funding, and ensure program sustainability. Given that measuring child well-being is an area of fatherhood work that is open to new and innovative approaches, here are a few tips and suggestions to consider.



WORK WITH AN EXTERNAL RESEARCHER

Gathering information from or about children may require asking children sensitive questions, gaining access to school or medical records, and obtaining parental permission to speak with or observe the behavior of their children. It may also lead to situations where information is obtained that may be subject to mandatory child welfare reporting. Working with a qualified external researcher or research organization can help fatherhood programs plan, prepare, and respond to all scenarios in ways that prioritize the safety and well-being of children.

- Partnering with a researcher will ensure that procedures for responsible and secure data handling, informed consent, and human subjects protections are followed, which is critical when working with vulnerable populations such as minors. Local colleges and universities may have professors who are interested in conducting research in this area and/or doctoral students who can devote pro-bono time to support community programs while under the advisement of trained faculty.



SELECT APPROPRIATE MEASURES

Many outcomes can be measured to track child well-being, but it's critical to select measures that are appropriate for a specific fatherhood program. For example, don't expect to see a change in a child's eating habits if the program hasn't emphasized good nutrition or if a father only has limited contact with their child.

- A practical first step is to see how measurable outcomes align with the program's theory of change or logic model, and the relationship between services provided and expected outcomes.
- There are well-established measures and instruments for the outcomes mentioned in this brief so it's important to consult with a researcher with this expertise.



MEASURE CHILD WELL-BEING ACROSS DIFFERENT AGES

For example, the Future of Families and Child Well-being Study (FFCWS) is a large study that collected data on children at birth, age 1, age 3, age 5, age 9, age 15, and age 22.

- FFCWS collected some measures at all age points, while some types of data were only collected for older children. The focus on social development can change as a child gets older. For example, data collected for infants and toddlers may include attachment to caregivers, whereas for preschool and school-age children data collection may focus more on interactions with peers. Moreover, data for younger children often requires parent-reported measures and observational assessment, while older children can provide self-reports and participate in more complex cognitive assessments.
- A starting point for program operators could be to focus on the most relevant outcomes for each major age range:
 - For preschool children this might be focusing on eating habits, physical activity levels, and language development.
 - For children in the early school years, it might include focusing on health screenings, sleep patterns, self-esteem, and diet.
 - For teenagers, there may be more access to data on test scores, college expectations, grade-point averages, school attendance, graduation, teen parenthood, substance use, critical thinking skills, and identity formation.



TALK WITH FATHERS (AND MOTHERS IF POSSIBLE)

Fathers and mothers can be a helpful source of information about their children's psychological health.

- If they live with or have regular contact with their children, ask fathers to describe their children's typical behavior. (If a father does not have regular contact with the children, but is engaged at some level, consider asking the mother a similar set of questions to help gauge any changes over time as the father participates in the program.)
- Validated tools can be used, such as the [Achenbach's Child Behavior Checklist](#). The goal of this tool is to document the presence or absence of certain behavioral and emotional problems. Examples from the checklist include:
 - *"Threatens people"*
 - *"Unhappy, sad, or depressed"*
 - *"Too fearful or anxious"*
- Look for tools that utilize a strengths-based approach and that are adaptable to ensure cultural responsiveness.



MEASURE INTERACTIONS BETWEEN FATHERS AND CHILDREN AND BETWEEN CHILDREN AND THEIR PEERS

Examine father-child relationships not only in terms of the amount of time spent together but also the quality of their interactions. For example, the evaluation of the [Fathers and Sons Project](#) in Flint, Michigan (Caldwell et al., 2014) looked at the quality of father-child relationships by collecting data from both fathers and their children.

- Parent-child communication was one area explored in this study. Fathers were asked about the ease they had in speaking about problems with their child, and children were asked similar questions about their ease in speaking with their father.
- Questions for children to gauge social interactions might include:
 - *How comfortable are you in social situations?*
 - *Do you have any close friends?*
 - *How comfortable are you speaking with your father about problems?*
 - *How comfortable are you speaking with your mother about problems?*
- Questions for parents to gauge their children's social interactions could include:
 - *Does your child have any close friends?*
 - *How well does your child communicate with family members?*
 - *How well does your child get along with other children?*



MEASURE DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF ECONOMIC CIRCUMSTANCES

Instead of only assessing whether, and how much, a father is contributing financially, remember that a family's financial context has many components such as housing stability, food security, family income, financial stability, and access to supportive services.

- Be sure to include questions in intake and follow-up surveys that measure various components of a father's economic circumstances. Potential questions to ask include:
 - *Have you been evicted from your apartment or home in the past 12 months?*
 - *Have you experienced any utilities being shut off due to inability to pay in the past 12 months?*



MEASURE PHYSICAL HEALTH AND BEHAVIOR

Measuring physical health and behavior can be particularly challenging, but there are some innovative strategies that fatherhood programs could consider. For example:

- Document any curriculum or service activities that emphasize the importance of paternal and/or child health.
- Gather pre- and post-data from fathers and mothers related to their child's physical health (e.g., access to affordable health care, good nutrition, amount of sleep, and engagement in sports and other wellness activities).



MEASURE LONG-TERM BENEFITS

Most efforts to look at child well-being tend to look at short periods of time which may not show the full impact of a fatherhood program on child well-being.

- Be creative! Look for opportunities to collect long-term data or access longitudinal data sets.
- If you develop or discover successful approaches to demonstrating the impact of fatherhood programming on child well-being, share it with others so that the fatherhood field can continue to evolve and develop in meaningful ways.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[FRAMING Research Project](#)

This project synthesizes existing and ongoing research related to fatherhood programs. It is a useful resource for anyone that wants to gain a quick understanding of the latest research.

[Measuring the Results of Your Fatherhood Program](#)

This resource from the National Fatherhood Initiative provides general guidance on how to use quantitative and qualitative methods to evaluate fatherhood programs.

[What is Child Well-being?: Does It Matter How We Measure It?](#)

This is a slideshow presentation developed by Child Trends at the National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference in San Antonio, Texas, in 2013. It provides examples of possible ways to measure child well-being for children along the domains of physical health, development, and safety; psychological and emotional development; social development and behavior; and cognitive development and educational achievement.

[Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study](#)

Formerly known as the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, this ongoing study is following a nationally representative study of children born in medium to large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000. The study's purpose is to understand how children fare based on whether they grow up in a single parent, cohabitating, or married-couple household. The robust data set provides examples of ways to measure outcomes at various stages of a child's life.

[How to Use A Logic Model to Supercharge Your Fatherhood Outcomes](#)

This resource from the National Fatherhood Initiative provides foundational guidance on how to think visually about how a fatherhood program's inputs (resources) and outputs (activities) relate to outcomes and impacts.

[Utilization-Focused Evaluation Checklist](#)

This resource provides guidance on how to be intentional about creating evaluations that are useful to inform the implementation of a program.

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