

LEARN, DO, REFLECT

*A Summary of Findings
from the Strengthening
the Implementation of
Responsible Fatherhood
Programs Study*



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INTRODUCING SIRF

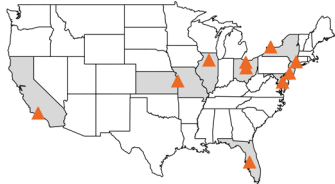
This document summarizes what was learned in a study called SIRF (Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs) that aimed to build evidence on promising practices to improve the enrollment, engagement, and retention of fathers in fatherhood programs.¹ SIRF engaged 10 fatherhood programs in using learning cycles—repeated periods of implementing ideas and reflecting on the results—to assess promising approaches to addressing certain program challenges.² The document begins with an overview of the study’s startup, its design, and the learning-cycle processes, then provides a short summary of the promising approaches tested, and concludes with some implications of what the learning cycles found about the tested approaches.

About SIRF

Members of the SIRF research team began by talking to program practitioners, policymakers, and academics with expertise in the fatherhood field. (See Box 1 for more on the organizations participating in SIRF.) The conversations centered on challenges that programs encounter in getting fathers to participate in program services. The team also asked experts about promising approaches to address those challenges.

BOX 1

SIRF is an MDRC-led collaboration among:

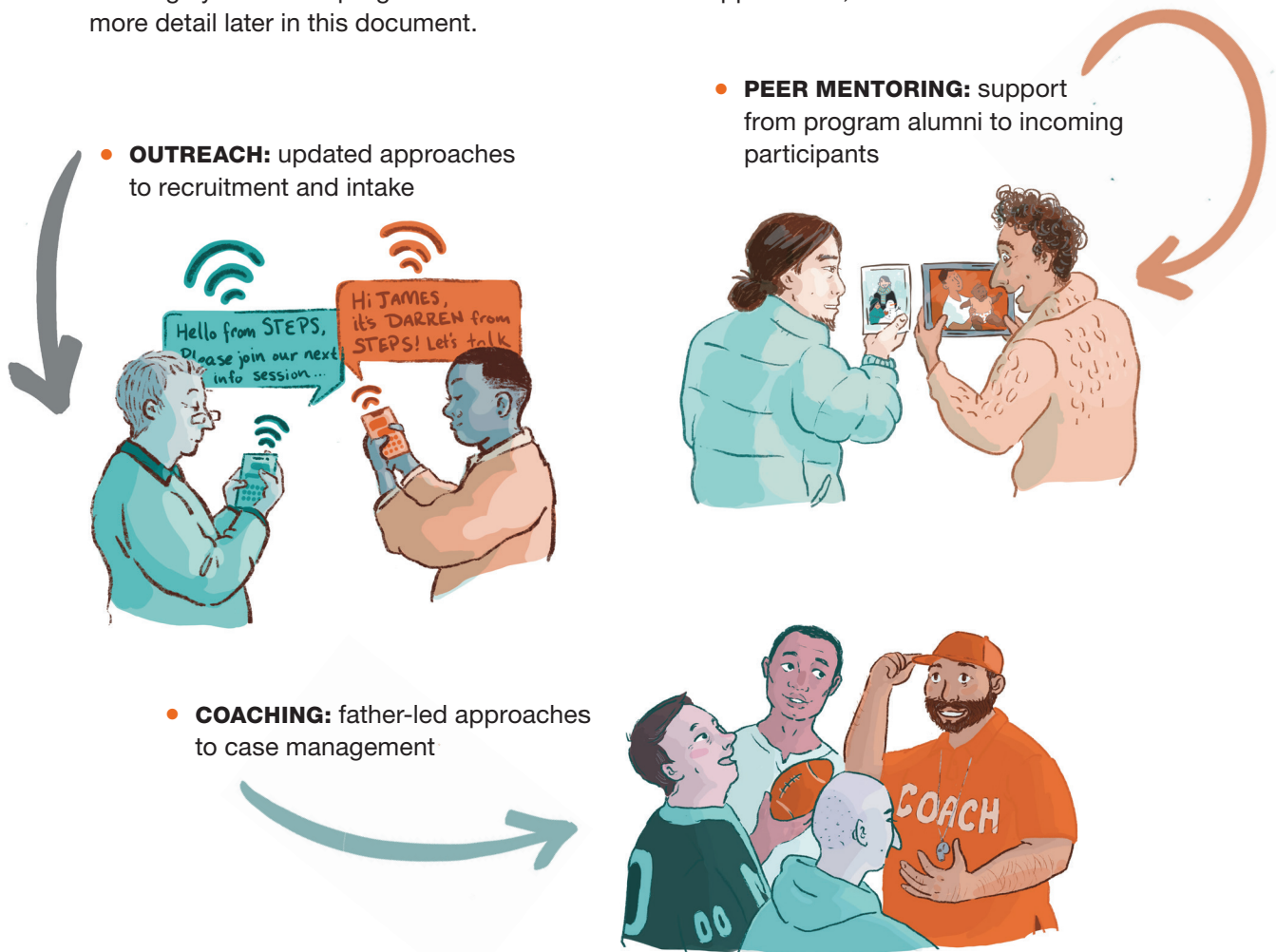
10 FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS 	3 RESEARCH ORGANIZATIONS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• MDRC• MEF Associates• Westat Insight
2 TRAINING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CONSULTANTS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Executive Skills, LLC• Spearca Communications	& THE U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Office of Family Assistance• Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation

The challenges fell into four categories, and promising approaches were grouped accordingly:

- Fathers are not interested in the program
- Fathers do not think the program is the right fit for their needs
- Fathers have unmet basic needs
- Fathers have other relationships or commitments to attend to³

The SIRF research team next engaged prospective SIRF programs in customer journey mapping. In this exercise, program staff members were asked to think about their programs from the perspective of fathers to identify where fathers might face challenges in participating. Staff members also used the exercise to identify the challenges and approaches that most resonated with their local contexts.⁴

Based on the work done up to and during the mapping exercise, the SIRF research team recommended three approaches to test with the 10 programs chosen to participate in SIRF learning cycles. Each program tested one of the three approaches, which are described in more detail later in this document.

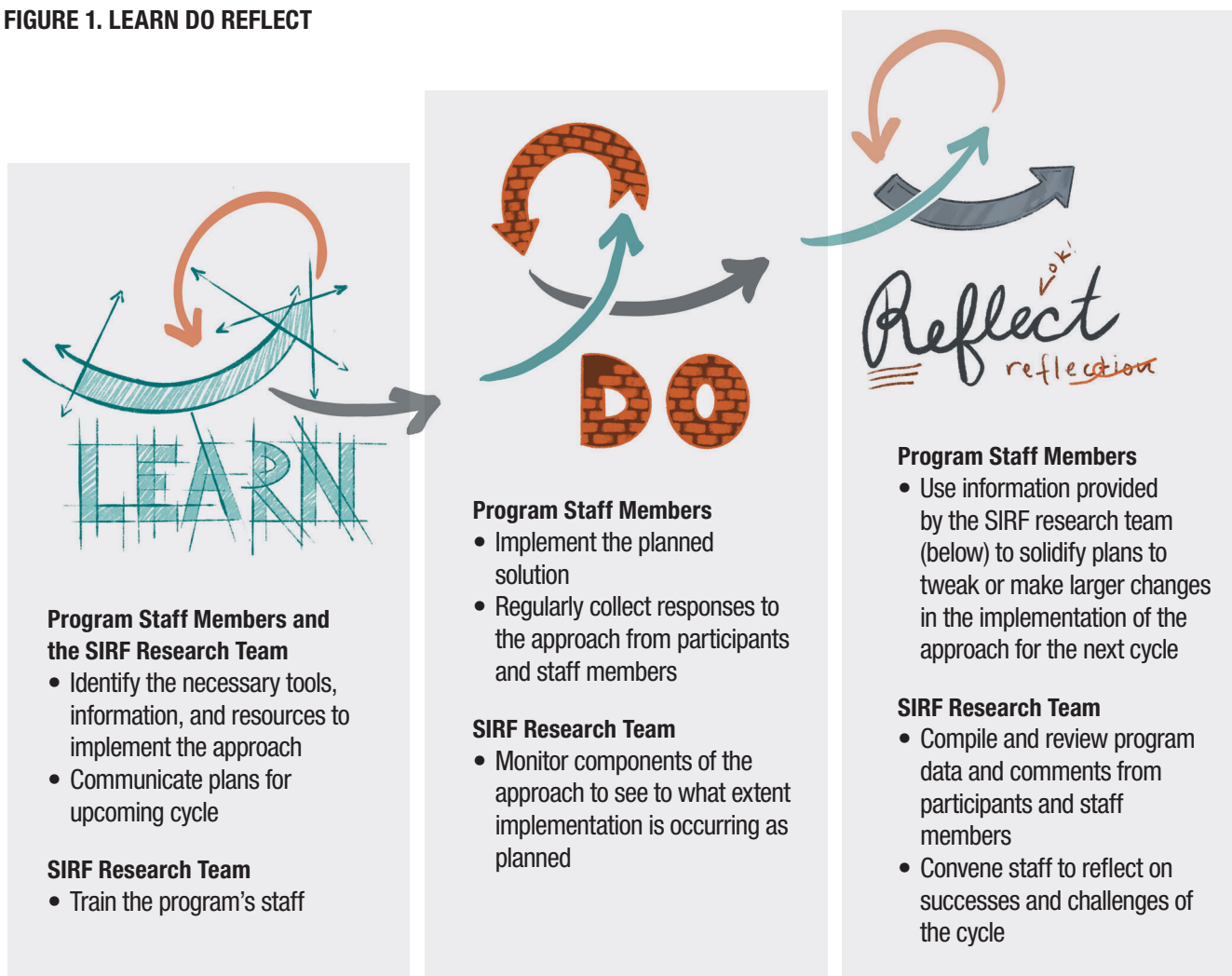


THE SIRF LEARNING CYCLES

Learn-Do-Reflect

Each SIRF learning cycle was divided into three phases: **LEARN**, **DO**, and **REFLECT**. This structure, described in more detail in Figure 1, allowed programs the opportunity to use data to make decisions about the SIRF approach at regular intervals. The programs conducted either three or four cycles over approximately 12 months.⁵

FIGURE 1. LEARN DO REFLECT



Data Sources

- **“SIRFboard.”** The SIRFboard was an Excel file that provided a template to record data from implementing the approach, which were then aggregated into easy-to-digest summary charts. The SIRF research team customized the tool for each approach being tested, as well as for each program’s needs.
- **nFORM.** nFORM (Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management) is the federal management information system that all participating programs use to track program enrollment and participation.
- **Father and staff response forms.** Program participants had the opportunity in each program workshop series and staff members had the opportunity in each learning cycle to describe their experiences with the approach.



At the end of each cycle, the SIRF research team assembled all the data listed above into a packet that was jointly reviewed by the SIRF research team and program teams on a call that culminated in program staff members deciding how implementation would change in the following cycle.

Strategic Collaboration & Support

Throughout the study period, the SIRF research team sought to build collaborative partnerships with programs. Program staff members were:

- Linked to the SIRF research team through a learning cycle manager, whose time was supported by SIRF project funds
- Involved in the selection and design of each approach being tested
- Asked at the end of each cycle to describe how the approach was working, and to comment on the support that the SIRF team was providing
- Included in every cycle’s reflection-and-redesign process
- Encouraged to connect with other participating programs through regular peer learning sessions



THE APPROACHES

OUTREACH

Can new recruitment and intake approaches improve the numbers of fathers who enroll in programs and attend initial workshops?



During the SIRF implementation period, outreach programs tried to improve participant enrollment and engagement in two ways. First, they experimented with new methods for recruiting potential participants, including new social media techniques and referral relationships. Then, the programs tested two approaches to bringing participants from first contact to program enrollment and attendance.

The two approaches differed in how they communicated with fathers and the services fathers had access to before they attended their first primary workshop. The programs found that **more fathers enrolled and attended at least one workshop if they used their early contacts with fathers to focus on the benefits of workshops (the “ease-of-intake” approach) rather than on making supportive services available before fathers enrolled (the “case management intake” approach).**⁶



Cycle Adjustments

Each program shown on the map on the next page implemented three or four learning cycles. Changes across cycles focused on the messages used by staff members, the times when program staff members would try to make contact with participants, and modes of communication.

Staff Member Reactions

Program staff members had different opinions about the value and effectiveness of the ease-of-intake and case management intake approaches, although staff members at all three programs testing outreach approaches acknowledged that there were benefits to both.

Some preferred the case management intake approach because it distributed the burden of completing the intake process over time, including during one-on-one contacts that happened before orientation, rather than concentrating it during orientation. However, it was sometimes challenging to schedule these preorientation intake appointments for the case management group.

Some program staff members noted that the ease-of-intake approach might have increased enrollment by streamlining the process, compared with the case management intake approach. However, they wondered whether the increase in enrollment would carry over into continued participation. They also noted that fathers who went through that type of intake did not appear to have as much information at orientation about the program as the case management intake group.



Father Reactions

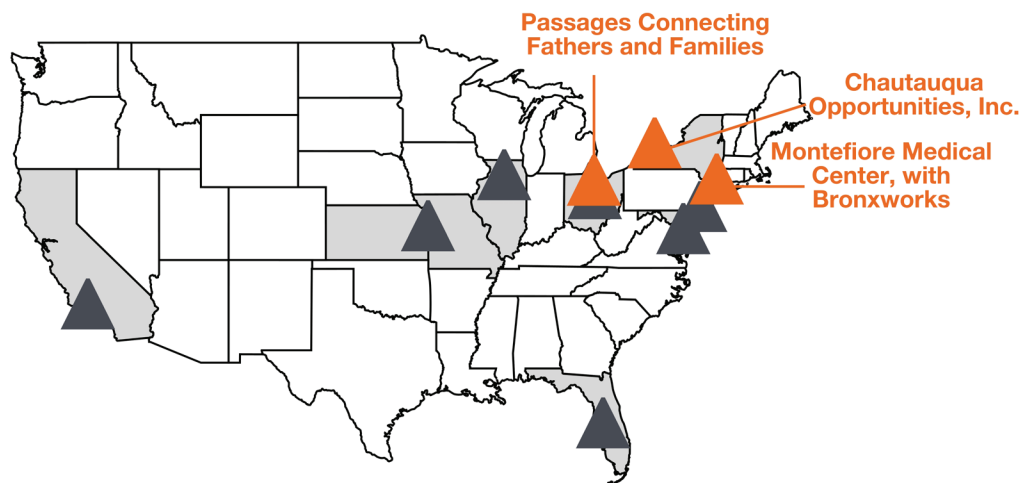
Fathers described their enrollment experiences as being easy and straightforward—regardless of whether they experienced the ease-of-intake or case management intake approach.

“I think they [staff members] do a great job of making dads feel comfortable. They’re understanding. They got a good tone of voice. They listen.”

Organizations Participating in Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF)

SIRF Solution

▲ = Outreach



PEER MENTORING

Can peer mentoring improve fathers' initial program attendance and continued participation?



Programs simultaneously implemented two different kinds of alumni mentorship. In either type, participants could reach out to assigned mentors; only in the second could mentors reach out to fathers.

Fathers in the father-initiated approach attended more workshops.⁷ Mentors were sometimes met with skepticism when they reached out to fathers, and some fathers said they did not feel the need for a mentor. These factors might have discouraged fathers in the mentor-initiated group from participating.



Cycle Adjustments

Each program implemented four learning cycles in trying out these two kinds of alumni mentorship. Programs in the peer mentoring group struggled initially to find enough mentors and to engage mentors in working with fathers. Programs responded to this struggle by reducing what they asked of mentors and by identifying mentors who had the time to commit to program activities. Additionally, from cycle to cycle, programs mainly focused on adjusting the number of mentor-mentee

contacts, as well as the modes of communication used, in order to find an approach that encouraged continued mentor participation.

Staff Member Reactions

One peer mentor said he never spoke to or heard from some fathers. Other times, fathers didn't know who he was, responding to outreach with questions like, "Who are you? Why do you have my contact information?"

Program staff members noted that adding a mentor to the relationships that fathers were building with other program staff members could be overwhelming or burdensome. However, some mentors and staff members reported strong mentor-participant connections.



Father Reactions

Some fathers did not feel the need to connect with a mentor because they had an established support system or felt sufficiently supported by their case managers. Others said it was valuable to have a peer mentor and resource in a fellow father who had been through similar experiences. Still other fathers did not recall having a peer mentor.

The kind of mentoring fathers received did not seem to influence how they perceived their other experiences in their programs. Fathers who received both types of mentoring described above answered similarly when asked about their relationships with program staff members and what aspects of the program they found most useful.

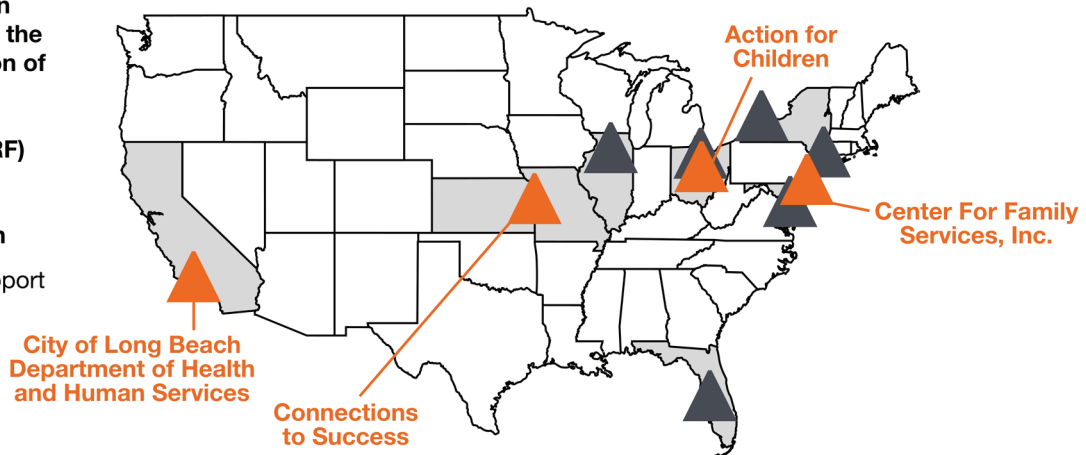
Mentor: *"Because so many of our situations are similar... I find that I relate on a multitude of levels, and I'm able to relate to them and they're able to relate to me... A lot of our household, when we were growing up as children, looked almost identical. A lot of just like the normal, everyday issues that people tend to face, you know, rent, and groceries, and clothes."*



Organizations Participating in Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF)

SIRF Solution

▲ = Peer Support



COACHING

Can a coaching approach to case management improve early program engagement and sustained attendance?



Case managers in the programs that implemented coaching let each father lead the process of setting his goals. They used open-ended questions, affirmed the father’s statements and reflected them back to him, and used other methods to encourage the father to identify and talk about his needs.

All participants in the coaching programs received this new approach to case management. Compared with other SIRF programs, **coaching did not appear to improve fathers’ participation in program activities.** Participation also did not increase across cycles, which might have been expected as programs improved how they implemented coaching.



Cycle Adjustments

Programs implemented three or four learning cycles of this coaching approach to case management. Across cycles, changes focused primarily on strengthening the implementation of coaching.

Staff Member Reactions

Some program staff members appreciated the relationships coaching allowed them to develop with participants. However, some challenged the underlying principles of the coaching model. For example, some thought that some clients benefit from and prefer a more directive approach.



Father Reactions

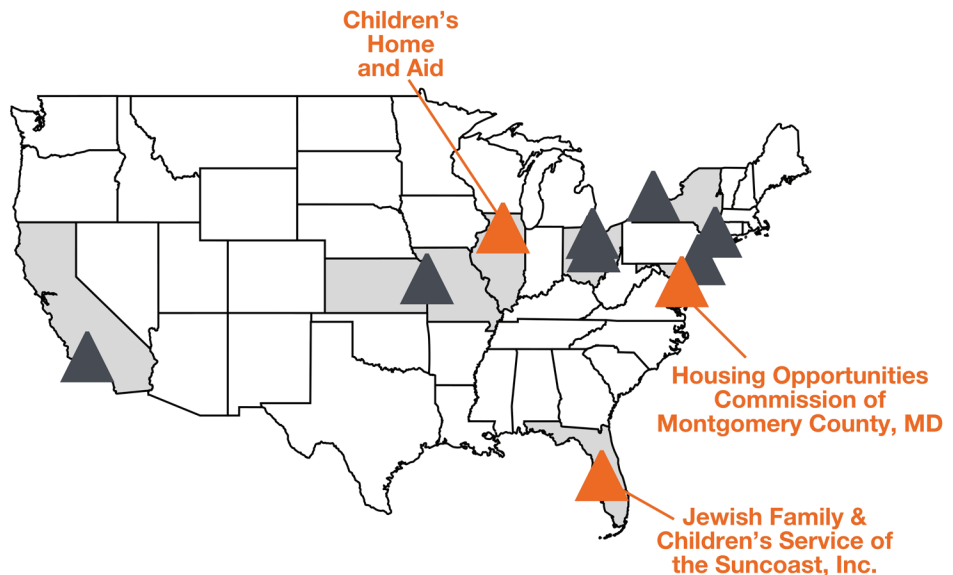
Some participants commended the coaching approach for allowing them to feel more supported than similar interactions they had had in the past. However, not all fathers loved the approach. Some fathers indicated that they benefited from the more directive and natural relationship that they had with their workshop facilitator, with whom they had more frequent interaction than they did with their coach.

“I have had more case managers in my life than I can count. She’s the first one I’ve ever trusted, ever. And it’s all because she acknowledges me as the individual that I am. Plain and simple. I’ve never been made to feel like I was just another number that she had to work with. In my entire life with all the case managers I’ve worked with she’s the only one that’s ever actually made me feel like a real individual.”



Organizations Participating in Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF)

SIRF Solution
▲ = Coaching



IMPLICATIONS

Look for approaches that are not burdensome to fathers.

For both the outreach and peer mentoring clusters, the approach that improved fathers' initial engagement was the one that was less burdensome for fathers (the ease-of-intake outreach approach and the father-initiated peer mentoring approach). When trying different approaches, be mindful of demands being placed on fathers.

Use program data to strengthen program activities.

SIRF emphasized the use of data to guide decisions, which helped strengthen the programs' existing processes for improving their practices. It also helped establish a culture of using data for learning and innovating.

To use learning cycles well, hire someone to oversee them.

Learning cycle managers funded through SIRF helped ensure data were available for analysis and that the cyclical analytic process was followed.

Keep staff members who implement program approaches informed.

Some front-line staff members expressed frustration at feeling disconnected from decisions made through SIRF. To ensure staff support at all levels, make sure a broad base of staff members is included in learning and decision-making.

To get the most out of learning cycles, allow enough time for them to develop.

Both fatherhood programs and learning cycles are complex and difficult to implement well. Dedicate enough learning cycles and enough time per cycle to be able to develop and tailor approaches that are successful.

Notes and References

- 1 SIRF was carried out under a contract with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, with funds from the Office of Family Assistance (OFA) within the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. OFA has funded fatherhood programs since 2006; they are intended to promote or sustain relationships, foster strong parent-child relationships, and help fathers attain economic stability.
- 2 For more information on the study design, including detailed descriptions of the learning cycle process, see Charles Michalopoulos, Rebecca Behrmann, and Michelle S. Manno, [Using Learning Cycles to Strengthen Fatherhood Programs: An Introduction to the Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs \(SIRF\) Study](#), OPRE Report 2022-62 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).
- 3 For more information, see Emily Marano, Dina Israel, and Diego Quezada, [“What Strategies Can Programs Use to Help More Dads Participate in Fatherhood Services?”](#) OPRE Report 2022-65 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).
- 4 For more information, see Rebecca Behrmann, Becca Heilman, Kureem Nugent, and Donna Wharton-Fields, [“Walking in Participants’ Shoes: Customer Journey Mapping as a Tool to Identify Barriers to Program Participation,”](#) OPRE Report 2022-131 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).
- 5 For more information on the learning cycles in practice, including visuals highlighting changes programs made during the Reflect periods, see Keri West, Diego Quezada, Jonny Poilpré, and Rebecca Behrmann, [“Try, Reflect, Try Again: How Fatherhood Programs Used Learning Cycles in Efforts to Improve Participation Outcomes,”](#) OPRE Report 2023-71 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).
- 6 The two approaches were compared using random assignment. For details on the trial’s methods and results, see Charles Michalopoulos, Emily Marano, Becca Heilman, Michelle Manno, Patrizia Mancini, and Scott Cody, [Using Learning Cycles to Strengthen Fatherhood Programs: Final Report on the Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs \(SIRF\) Study](#), OPRE Report 2023-60 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).
- 7 The two approaches were compared using random assignment. For details on the trial’s methods and results, see [Michalopoulos et al. \(2023\)](#).

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