



Compassion Outreach
of America

FATHERS MATTER

FATHERHOOD STUDY
& 2021 PROGRAM REPORT



Executive Summary

It's no secret that fathers are vital to the overall success of the family structure. In times past, mothers have been characterized as children's primary caregiver. Research has shown however, that "fathers also play an important role in the child's life and are instrumental with influencing cognitive, socio-emotional, physical, and developmental needs in their infants and children" (Copeland, p. 5). Within the last ten years, there has been an increased focus among service providers and researchers to discuss the importance of including and engaging fathers within the family structure. Despite the heightened attention given, the implementation and sustainability of fatherhood programs, methods and strategies have not been completely successful. Although some fatherhood programs have been sustained, the demand far exceeds the supply. For this reason, Compassion Outreach of America (COA) launched the Father's Matter (FM) program. Since 2016, FM has offered several programs and services to the local community, including weekly Dad Discussions, mentorship programs and organizational consulting. Additionally, the Fathers Matter program has been featured in several media outlets: The Good Morning Radio Show with Oliver Thomas on WBOK 1230 AM, Coronavirus Impact: State of Mind on WDSU evening news and featured in New Orleans Data News Weekly.

Like many social service programs FM was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and had to find new ways to deliver services. One essential transition made during the pandemic was the migration from in-person to virtual sessions. Going virtual allowed FM to reach men outside of Louisiana, as a result there was a surge in the number of out of state participants. While it was exciting and encouraging to engage additional fathers, we were particularly concerned about fathers in the Greater New Orleans area.

In September 2021, Fathers Matter conducted a fatherhood focus group to gain insight directly from fathers regarding their unique experiences, aspirations, needs and concerns, which will enhance FM's ability to design relevant programming to promote fatherhood. The results from this focus group will be brought to the leadership of local organizations and agencies with an invitation to strategize more effective ways to promote fatherhood community wide and across different sectors, such as the social services, education, healthcare, media, business, and government.

The focus group consisted of 10 African American fathers, with children 12 years and younger. Interviews revealed that participants valued their positions as fathers and placed tremendous value on being fully prepared and equipped to parent well. When discussing parental challenges brought on during the pandemic many fathers expressed being exhausted. However, fathers were able to maintain their focus to navigate the pandemic and associated challenges. Ultimately, all men agreed that the expansion of safe spaces and additional resources for fathers are essential to their mental and emotional well-being and the overall well-being of their families.

Fatherhood Study

Introduction

The role of fathers comes with great responsibility. However, males have often found themselves navigating the fatherhood role with little information or guidance. This is due in large part to society's focus on parenting programs designed and tailored to the needs of mothers. Compounding the lack of resources for fathers is the onset of a pandemic that has helped surface new parenting challenges, especially for fathers navigating these unprecedented times. Needless to say, fathers have experienced immense pressure to succeed in areas where they have often been uninformed, unprepared and/or ill-equipped.

During this study's focus group, fathers shared their triumphs and challenges as well as their advice for future FM programming. The following analysis highlights key themes that emerged during the focus group regarding both facilitators and barriers to fatherhood.



Methodology

This study sought to understand the unique experiences, needs and concerns of fathers in an effort to enhance Fathers Matter's ability to design relevant programming and promote fatherhood. A phenomenological approach was used to better understand father's lived experiences (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002).

This study examined the following research questions:

1. What does it mean to be a father?
2. How did males prepare for fatherhood?
3. What is the role of fathers in parenting their child?
4. What impact did the pandemic have on fathers parenting style?

Data for this study was collected through demographic questionnaires and a semi-structured interview. A semi-structured interview approach was used to facilitate the group discussion. The 2-hour interview was conducted on Zoom.

Participants for this study were recruited through word of mouth technique and were offered a \$50 gift card for participation. A total of 10 African American fathers with children 12 years of age and younger participated in this study.



This study contributes to the body of research by lifting up the experiences and needs of fathers, providing recommendations for ways to improve fatherhood services design, and the promotion of fatherhood.

Demographics of Fathers in the Focus Group

Total number of fathers in the focus group = 10

<p>Race: Black, Non-Hispanic: 100 %</p> <p>Age: 25-34: 20% 35-44: 40% 45-54: 30% 55-64: 10%</p> <p>Marital Status: Single: 20% Married: 80%</p> <p>Age of Children: @ least one child under 4 years of age 80% @ least one child 5-12 years of age: 40% @ least one child 13-18 years of age: 20%</p>	<p>Annual Income: Less than \$50,000: 60% Over \$50,000: 40%</p> <p>Employment: Self-employed: 20% Employed (part-time): 20% Employed (full-time): 60%</p> <p>Education: High School Diploma/GED: 20% Some College: 40% Bachelor’s Degree: 30% Advanced Degree: 10%</p>
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Themes that emerged from the Focus Group

Fathering During A Pandemic

As a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic FM had to change its service delivery model from in-person session to a virtual approach. With the presence of a vaccine and a loosening of mandates society has slowly become safer and a sense of normality has returned. In response to these changes FM hosted a fatherhood focus group to gain insight from fathers on how they are experiencing the pandemic. Additionally, FM wanted to hear directly from fathers the items they deemed important for fathers and the ways FM should be thinking about future programming. Here's what we learned:

- Fathers felt overwhelmed during the pandemic. Many Black fathers were traumatized by George Floyd's murder and the prevalence of racism the killing connotes.
- Fathers desire to be more meaningfully engaged in the care of their children.
- Fathers need a safe space to address their own unique mental and social-emotional health.
- Fathers want to change false and unhealthy images and narratives of Black fathers in particular.

A positive byproduct of the pandemic is the frequency at which we are hearing anecdotes from fathers about taking on additional responsibilities in the home. For nearly a year, families were together in quarantine and fathers were afforded rare insight into their family management system. Participants in the study discussed how they have gained empathy for their partners during the pandemic because they shared new responsibilities like homeschooling, child care, and discipline.

Quotes from the Study: Fathering During A Pandemic

"You're always around your kids and you're always around your wife."

"I've been learning the difference in parenting styles. You hear arguments. You hear the mom and the kids fighting and I think to myself, 'I don't think that'll be a fight I'll take. But mom she'll really be going in on the kid for something I'd be like 'whatever, dude, go sit down.'"

"I hold myself responsible for helping like changing diapers, doing certain things, making sure bottles are made, taking care of certain needs, bedtime, even just spending quality time with them."



"They were going to virtual. They were messing with each other during school. So I had to deal with that. That virtual was killing it. It wasn't good. They were punished the whole time they were on the virtual thing."

"I'm a truck driver. So pretty much through the pandemic I've been quarantined in my truck. When I go home I'm quarantined. Being that I'm out here, when I do come home, I got to deal with the wife, who has been quarantined at home."

"I'm just looking into the future and saying, is this healthy for us being locked up?"

Joy of Fatherhood

While many of the participants acknowledged the stress and challenges associated with fathering during the pandemic, each expressed a sense of great fulfillment in being a father. Fathers in this study discussed the importance of quality of time spent with their children. When participants were asked what was your most memorable moment as a father, participants clearly communicated an understanding that the greatest present they can give their children is their presence. So while financial support is essential to care for children, equally if not more important is being there for a child to provide love, guidance, and emotional stability.

Quotes from the Study: Joy of Fatherhood

"I enjoy being a dad."

"My oldest son, he's not biologically mine, but I've been in his life since he was four years old. I remember he asked me, 'Can I call you Daddy?' I'm going to be honest, at first I didn't really know how to respond. I really did not understand how big of a deal it was at the time, because this was my first experience as a father. I went to his school one day for a Thanksgiving luncheon and this little girl turned around and she said, 'There go your dad.' Man, when he saw me he lit up."

"I was in the room when my son was born. It was so abrupt. The nurse just shoved him in my hands and said, 'Now you got to get out. We got to work on her.' And she just ushered me out of the room with this baby. I looked down. He was trying to open his eyes and he barely got one eye open and he looked up at me. I was a mess. He didn't say nothing, but, man. I was looking at him and he was just barely squeezing open at me. I'm like, 'Yeah, it's us. It's us.'"

"I didn't know what life was until I had my boys."

"I'm only 27 years old, but my kids are 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, and one. Yeah, they all in that order and they all boys. It really touches my heart just seeing them all gathered by me." They just so curious. They'll ask me stuff like, 'Dad, could you teach us more? And why did God do this? Or why did he create this? And could you pray for us dad?' When my kids are asking me to learn more about God? Even them using words like that. I just see that God is really in the midst and He's really doing something."

"I got four kids and none of them are my biological kids. I'm also married, but they've been in the system. The two youngest, they were the first to just start calling me dad. The oldest one, he was like the toughest for me to get through. I went through the, 'You ain't my daddy and all that.' I had to do a lot to get to him before he eventually came around. I stuck through it, and I'd never trade it. Never trade it."

"I just love being a dad, love being a black father."

Positive Images of Black Fatherhood

For many African American men the pandemic has exacerbated the issue of racism in society. In New Orleans the first wave of the pandemic disproportionately impacted African Americans who make up "59 percent of the population...[and] 75 percent of COVID deaths (Weinstein and Plyer, 2021). Many participants noted being more concerned about the impact of pre-existing conditions

of racism on their children than the actual virus.

Participants also expressed the need to not only protect their children from COVID-19, but to also equip their children to navigate society as a person of color. Fathers expressed a need to promote positive images of Black fathers to counter the narrative of the deadbeat dad, and to celebrate fatherhood.



For some fathers, they had positive images of fatherhood to follow in their fathers and grandfathers. Others looked to television and media for aspirational images to emulate such as Dr. Heathcliff Huxtable, a fictional character on the NBC sitcom, *The Cosby Show* created and portrayed by Bill Cosby. Positive images of Black fatherhood provide a roadmap to follow and can serve to counteract the negative messages that can create self-doubt and lack of confidence, two destructive barriers to fatherhood that have adverse effects on the father-child relationship (Julion, 2007).

Quotes from the Study: Positive Images of Black Fatherhood

"I am the father of a five year old son and I'm just extremely concerned about the image of the Black male. As I watch movements and mass media, propaganda and advertising, how we are being defined and how the image of a proud black male is being transformed into something other than what I think my father, grandfather, great-great grandfather, ancestors would want it to be. How can we begin to redo or reshape that image moving forward in the 21st century?"

"Recently my son came home from school talking about Uncle Bobby. So there's a book called Uncle Bobby's Wedding about a white male marrying a black male and the black male is in the female position, the bride in it. I'm like, 'Come on, bro.'"

"Growing up watching Cosby show, I always wanted to have a family like that or be positive like that, but the reality of life wasn't exactly like that. So what I tried to do is build around that."

"Whenever they talk about bad children or children in bad situations, they'll say absent fathers or the father wasn't there. They'll always bring it up if it's a bad thing, but when it is a good thing, we are not celebrated. So I want to be able to discuss that and push that more."

"I don't think our cultural survival as a black race isn't possible without prominent, viable, sane, sober and secure black men."

Most Important Role Fathers Play in Parenting

Traditionally, a father's role has been seen as that of provider and protector. An emerging recognition of father's role as nurturers is gaining popularity. Lamb (2000), conducted a literature re-view and observed that fatherhood has been conceptualized in the following ways: moral teacher, bread-winner, sex role model, and nurturant father. In this study the fathers unanimously agreed that their role extended beyond the boundaries of money and physical safety to include spiritual guidance, emotional security, and legacy. Lastly, fathers cited a recognition that their children would much rather spend time with dad, than the material items fathers can purchase.

Quotes from the Study: Most Important Role Fathers Play in Parenting

"Very excited to actually be an example to them and looking forward to actually pouring into them in order to strengthen them so that they can be a change agent in the environment around them."

“Teaching them about the Lord Jesus Christ.”

“Emotional stability and security, especially from a black man, ultimately breeds confidence and security in those kids, especially these days.”

“I’m in the habit of taking him in the spaces that I go to. Black kids too often are relegated to certain spaces and out of others. I let him know that anywhere he is, is where he belongs and anywhere his dad takes him is where he’s safe.”

“It’s making sure that every day I leave footprints where my son can continue to follow the legacy.”

Preparation for Fatherhood

Becoming a father is simultaneously transformational, rewarding, and challenging. In general preparation for fatherhood is often neglected or viewed as unnecessary for some men. However, fathers can reduce the stress and anxiety of becoming a father through preparation. Some practical skills men can learn prior to fatherhood include how to care for an infant, disciplining a toddler, and communicating with a teen are all skills fathers will need along the parenting journey. Fathers shared that they did not intentionally prepare for fatherhood as they would for most other important events in their lives. However, in preparation for fatherhood some participants looked for role models to emulate and turned to partners and spouses for support.

Quotes from the Study: Preparation for Fatherhood

“I know people talk bad about Cosby, but I think that was one of the ways I prepared for fatherhood.”

“My son coming to stay with me full time now is evolving my concept of parenting. It’s a real eye opening experience.”

“It’s still a work in progress for me to learn what I should do to cause them to be stable and having myself prepared. I’m still growing in that.”

“I wasn’t prepared for that at all. I got two nephews. As far as my sister used to live with us when my nephew was a baby. My nephew made it look easy because he ain’t cried or nothing. My daughter she got to crying and man, I said, look, girl, I wasn’t ready for that at all. I had to get used to that. I ain’t had a baby crying at night. I ain’t have no newborn crying in my ear.”

Building Intentional Supports for Father Involvement

Fathers desire to be involved in the child rearing process. This study uncovered that there are both facilitators of and barriers to fatherhood for men. Facilitators include a strong sense of purpose or responsibility, gainful employment, and access to children. Barriers include contentious co-parenting relationships, unemployment, lack of access to social services (Brodie, 2014). Researchers have noted that when fathers have limited or denied access their children are at higher risk for psychosocial issues. Providers must consider the unique opportunities and challenges fathers face when building intentional support for fathers to be involved.



Quotes from the Study: Building Intentional Supports For Father Involvement

“Since my kids been alive, man, I’ve been having a battle just to be an involved dad, because once I leave this woman, I knew it was going to be some drama and I was all the way right.”

“Fathers don’t have a lot of benefits. We don’t have a lot of aid and assistance.”

“Just give fathers their God given rights as leaders of the family.”

“Support for fathers who are far behind in child support and things like that. I know I talked to a lot of different guys and they just feel like they need to run.”

“We’ve got fathers coming out of jail. They need to be in something like the FM program.”

“I would say that there’s a need to have programs for fathers like they have WIC for the mothers and things of that nature.”

“One of the things that weighs on a father’s mind is to protect, provide and sacrifice. It’s hard if we don’t have the resources we need and don’t know how to get them.”

Creating Liberated Spaces for Fathers

A primary role that fathers play in the family is providing emotional security and confidence. Perceptions of a strong father as a stoic figure who never sheds a tear linger in the consciousness of many men even though the reality is quite different. A father's ability to provide emotional security and confidence is only as good as his ability to manage his own emotions and self-confidence. Many participants expressed the need for fathers to have a safe space, a term that connotes confidentiality and comfortability. Safe spaces are designed to be non-judgemental and non-confrontational environments. FM recognizes the necessity to go beyond creating a safe space to creating a liberated space. A liberated space embraces developmental discomfort and loving confrontation that challenges harmful notions of toxic masculinity, internalized racial oppression, and self-defeating behaviors. In liberated spaces fathers are able to not only share and process emotions and experiences, but also are encouraged to evolve and supported to act accordingly by peers and mentors. Fathers unanimously expressed the need for a space to nurture their own mental and emotional health that they can more confidently provide the emotional security their families need.

Quotes from the Study: Creating Liberated Spaces for Fathers

"Thank you for allowing a space for fathers to talk. I think this is necessary, this is needed."

"I only ever saw my dad cry three times in my life."

"Caring about fathers' mental stability, their mental health, where they are mentally and even spiritually, emotionally is so important."

"I feel like we all should help each other."

"I agree we should help each other, but a way that it might be a privacy thing."

"I remember how that looked, saying the state of ---, versus John Doe. That's a big thing when you think like whole state is against me, the whole system. It messes with you on a different level."

"I don't look at them as limits. I look at it as being from my imagination. There was things that was self-imposed. Things that I put on myself. I thought I had to make every Christmas, every thing, every this, every that. I put all that on myself. So that made it much more difficult, whereas my child was not even looking at it like that."

Quality Time/ Activities With Children

Fathers value spending time with their children, but work and other obligations sometimes impede father's ability to spend time with their children. However, fathers can be creative in cultivating quality time with children by turning ordinary activities into dates with dad. Many children enjoy accompanying their fathers on errands, to meetings, or doing chores. Other activities fathers can do with their children include going to parks, libraries, or preparing a home cooked meal which are all cost effective activities.

Fathers posited that expensive items and grand gestures are not as important as just being there for your child. Financial wherewithal should never prohibit a father from spending time with their children. Many fathers learned this valuable lesson the hard way and now better understand that the best present you can give your child is your presence.

Quotes from the Study: Quality Time/ Activities with Children

"Taking them to the track, to run, to play on Saturdays."

"I typically try to get them out the house to go do something, going to the library once upon a time before this pandemic."

"I let them have a movie night in their room. I set up the computer in their room, give them home-made movie tickets and let them watch a movie."

"I go pick my son up from school."

"I talked to my son about the girls."

"I gave him some daily affirmations that I wrote, and now he is writing his own."

"I'm trying to do family stuff, family night we sit around the table."

"I send them short notes."

"We clown around a lot."

"Your presence speaks volumes."

"I'm in the habit of taking him in the spaces that I go to. I brought him with me to give this talk at a law school."

"Every time we travel somewhere, we like to visit college campuses. Our kids have seen at least 10 college campuses."

Conclusion

Being a father is one of, if not, the most important roles a man will have in his life. Fathers in this study highly regard being a dad and desire to be actively engaged in their children's lives. Many fathers in this study hold a vision for fatherhood that is derived from aspirational sources whether it be their own fathers, positive media images, or spiritual beliefs. Their vision of fatherhood informs how they discipline, communicate, and interact within their families. However, most fathers received little to no practical preparation for fatherhood. Some even believed that it is impossible to prepare to be a father. While there are many things about parenting that can not be anticipated there are many things that men can do to prepare themselves for this new role that would support their transition to fatherhood. As outlined in this study fathers looked to their predecessors and role models to obtain a vision of fatherhood.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic many families were quarantined. The national lockdown facilitated more time and opportunities for families to spend time together. However, the additional time together caused many fathers' to experience feeling overwhelmed and stressed. Despite these negative emotions many fathers were unable or unwilling to express these feelings because of their desire to provide emotional stability for their families. Nevertheless, fathers in this study agreed that men need a space to process their emotions, moreover Black fathers need space to process the racial trauma they experience.

Lastly, this study identified facilitators and barriers to fatherhood. Most men asserted that one common barrier was self-imposed doubt. In regards to facilitators of fatherhood, dads noted celebrating and acknowledging fathers can help to change the negative images of fathers. This study points to the need for father-specific support and programming to address the unique needs of dads. When these needs are addressed fathers are able to demonstrate their strength and resilience, which will then position fathers to pass on a sense of stability to their children when their needs are met

Focus Group Participant Recommendations

Upon concluding the focus group participants were asked to give input on what programmatic priorities FM should undertake in 2022. Here's what we heard:

- Leverage multiple outlets to increase positive images of Black men & fathers
- Advance partnerships to provide core services such as legal consultation for visitations, workforce development, employment services, and counseling
- Provide father-specific programming and events that celebrates fatherhood, utilizes fathers' strengths, and addresses fathers and family needs

Fathers Matter 2021 Program Report

At Compassion Outreach of America we believe that children thrive when their families thrive, and families thrive when they live in supportive environments. This belief underlies COA's Fathers Matter program designed to improve the quality of life for children by encouraging and equipping men and fathers in strengthening their families and communities. Over the past year FM has worked across sectors to promote neighborhood-scale, male-focused, family-centered programs, and activities that contribute to healthy, stable families.

Demographic Picture of Fathers Served: N=43

- Race - Black, Non-Hispanic 100%
- Age - under 45 years of age 85%
- Marital Status - married or co-habiting 63%
single 37%
- Income - under \$50K 75%
under \$29K 45%



FM Key Initiatives

- Dad Discussions (DD) – Annual series of four 6-week parent education cohorts facilitated by fathers using the 24/7 Dad® an evidence-based fatherhood curriculum built on the premise that fathers can be nurturers, and for men, nurturing is a learned skill. Over the course of the DD cohort, men examine their fatherhood history, learn the characteristics of a nurturing father and other important behaviors such as effective communication, co-parenting, and developmentally appropriate child engagement practices. FM is currently in its eighth cohort and has graduated 91 fathers since 2018. The third cohort of 2021 was interrupted due to Hurricane Ida. There were 9 fathers enrolled. The orientation for the final cohort of the year began on October 14, 2021.

DD Overview

Cohort 1 - (24 enrolled)

Cohort 2 - (10 enrolled)

Cohort 3 - (9 enrolled) Interrupted by Hurricane IDA

Cohort 4 - in progress

- M.E.N. (Men Empowerment Network) – Stand-alone topic-focused workshops and classes designed to inform and educate men on a variety of topics including but not limited to fatherhood. Due to the pandemic we were unable to host as many in person activities as planned. M.E.N. Activities included - 2 Financial Fitness workshops, Grief workshop, Legal workshop.
- Date Night – Special events designed to encourage and support healthy relationships between partners and co-parents. Date Night Activities included- 2 Co-parenting workshops, Communication workshop, Mother's Day Gift Distribution
- Family Time – Activities that promote and encourage an increase in healthy interactions within the family, specifically between fathers and children. Family Time Activities included - 2 Play Time with Dads events in partnership with Training Grounds.

Evaluation

FM monitors attendance and engagement at workshops and events and uses a combination of pre and post surveys, participant satisfaction surveys, focused conversations, and testimonials to determine the effectiveness of programming. While this data is not meant to be an academic or scientific analysis, it does give us a baseline to set goals and objectives. In 2022, COA plans to work with an experienced program evaluator to design an even more robust program evaluation plan.

FM has been instrumental in helping fathers:

- Discover their innate ability to parent their child
- Identify and access community resources
- Address anxiety and depression during their transition into fatherhood
- Locate social supports to help them engage more intentionally in their child's care

2022 Goals

- Increase the number of fathers participating in FM's Dad Discussion cohorts
- Increase the quality of positive/developmentally appropriate father-child interactions
- Increase the number of trained peer-facilitators and navigators
- Convene a citywide, multi-agency fatherhood commission & Facilitate a 9-month community mobilization & action planning process, and develop the New Orleans Fatherhood Engagement Plan

Leadership

- **Sherdren Burnside, Executive Director of Compassion Outreach of America**, has faithfully served in inner-city ministry for more than 25 years. Since 2008, she has been heavily involved in violence reduction, education and training, blight reduction, and other Christian community development initiatives in the Greater New Orleans area. She is deeply committed to seeing people reconciled to God and communities holistically restored. Sherdren is married to Robert Burnside, Sr. and proud mother of Robert, Jr., Alexis, and Bethany.
- **Darrell Creecy, Program Manager of Fathers Matter**, facilitates workshops with fathers, does outreach to organizations, and creates relevant curriculum for the participant's success within the program. As a father of two, Darrell was drawn into this work after meeting many obstacles and hardships on his journey to become more involved as a parent. Darrell has since played an active role in researching how to support fathers for many years and now plans to grow that passion into positive, sustaining programs for the community.
- **Dr. Bantu D. Gross, Program Director of Fathers Matter**, passionately assists fathers in discovering and refining their innate fatherhood skills. Prior to his work with Fathers Matter, Dr. Gross served as a mental health professional with 10+ years of experience working with adolescents and young adults from diverse populations and backgrounds. Dr. Gross's research interests include the retention and persistence of African American males in college, relevance of HBCUs and racial identity development. In his leisure time, Dr. Gross enjoys spending time with his wife

Acknowledgements

Compassion Outreach of America would like to thank

Baptist Community Ministries

for their generous support in funding the Fathers Matter Program, the 2021 Fatherhood Report, and for recognizing the importance of fatherhood in child and family well-being.