

Research to Application: Planning Prompts

Introduction

As the nation's #1 provider of fatherhood skill-building programs and resources, NFI provides guidance for practitioners and organizations on how they might be able to use the latest research on human behavior to enhance the effectiveness of their work with fathers. NFI provides this guidance in a series of blog posts called *Research to Application: Guidance for Practitioners and Programs*. The series is also available in the form of quick reference guides that you can download by clicking on the button at the end of the posts.

The series offers a platform for generating dialogue among NFI, organizations, and practitioners on ways that research can be applied to addressing pain points in serving fathers. This post is the seventh one in the series. It provides ideas on how you might integrate research on **planning prompts**. Integrating this research could make you more effective in your work with fathers (e.g. facilitating a fatherhood program or working with fathers one-on-one).

If you implement any of the ideas in this post, or develop and implement your own ideas, please share them with us at info@fatherhood.org. We'll use your experiences to update this guide so it is even more useful.

Sometimes the simplest changes can have a big impact. Such is the case with **planning prompts**, which involve prompting people to plan when they'll follow through on and engage in a beneficial behavior.

Research on the use of planning prompts to increase healthy behaviors, such as getting flu shots and colonoscopies, has shown that simply having people write down the date and time when they'll engage in a healthy behavior dramatically increases engagement in that behavior.¹ Prompts work well even when people create them in private. But there is the potential that they can be even more effective when combined with another small change that research has shown increases people's commitment to engaging in a specific behavior: making a commitment public (i.e. making it in front of/in the presence others).²

The reason that planning prompts work whether people make them privately or publicly is the desire for humans to remain consistent with their commitments (i.e. to stick to their commitments). Think about when, during a political campaign, one politician running against another accuses his or her opponent of "flip-flopping." The accused typically denies flip-flopping.

¹ <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/small-steps-that-make-a-big-impact-on-achieving-goals/>

² Martin, S.J., Goldstein, N.H., & Cialdini, R. B. (2015). *The Small Big: Small Changes that Spark Big Influence*. London: Profile Books LTD.

The media jump all over this development in a political campaign and unwittingly pour gas on the fire by looking for evidence that the accused politician has changed her or his mind “as the political winds blow,” **even in the face of evidence that should have led to a change in position.**

Why is it that this tactic is so often applied in political campaigns? The reason is people want their politicians to be consistent with their commitments. Moreover, the public nature of politics makes changing position even more difficult for a politician. As a result, the media and public tend to ignore cases in which there is clear evidence that a politician should have changed his or her position. Simply accusing an opponent of flip-flopping is all a politician needs to do to discredit an opponent.

The good news is the need for people to be consistent with their commitments can be leveraged for good as well as ill, especially when commitments are made public. This small change has been used successfully in contexts as different as doctors’ offices and hotels. Patients asked by healthcare staff to write down the date and time of their next appointment on an appointment card, rather than the healthcare staff filling out the card, and hotel guests asked by hotel staff at check-in to commit to reusing their towels, and then given a badge indicating that commitment, have increased appointment show rates and reuse of towels, respectively.³ The public aspect of these commitments is when patients and customers make them in front of staff.

Ideas on Application

When it comes to working with fathers individually or in groups, you can use knowledge of planning prompts to more effectively work with them. Here are a few ideas:

- Have dads fill out reminder cards for future one-on-one or group interactions (e.g. sessions). It’s important that they fill out the cards. Don’t fill them out for the dads. Include the date and time of the next interaction. (Early in 2016, NFI will make such cards available for use with its programs to help facilitators increase retention of participants.)
- If you run group interactions, have the dads fill out the reminder cards in front of other dads to make their commitment public. To increase the likelihood that dads will maintain their commitment to attend the next interaction, assign dads to pairs of “accountability partners” in which the dads in each pair call each another ahead of the next interaction to remind each other to attend.
- If you run group interaction, create a catchy pledge of commitment to attend that the dads recite at the end of each interaction. Just a few sentences should do. Reciting such a pledge will make each dad’s commitment public.
- Use a checklist—a kind of planning prompt—to help you prepare for interactions with dads. Develop two checklists. The first one will help you prepare for any interaction with a dad(s). It should contain the same things you need to do regardless of the content of the interaction (e.g. what to communicate to the dad[s] before the interaction; how you will

³ Martin, S.J., Goldstein, N.H., & Cialdini, R. B. (2015). *The Small Big: Small Changes that Spark Big Influence*. London: Profile Books LTD.

communicate it; and how far in advance of the interaction you need to communicate it; room set up; and materials needed). The second should contain the things you need to do that are specific to an interaction (e.g. what to communicate to the dad[s] that is unique about the interaction, materials needed unique to that interaction, and engaging an expert to deliver content unique to an interaction). NFI uses such checklists in its programs to help facilitators prepare for every session and for each session. The programs contain a checklist of pre-session procedures that apply to every single session and a checklist for each session that contains unique procedures for a session. Using these checklists helps facilitators run the programs smoothly (e.g. they have less to worry about knowing they've adequately prepared and can focus on facilitation). (For more ideas on how to use checklists with dads, see the fifth post in this series on [keystone habits](#).)

Regardless of how you apply the knowledge of planning prompts, approach your effort as an experiment. Keep track of what works with fathers in general and with specific kinds of fathers (e.g. custodial and non-custodial) so that you can apply what works in future work with fathers one-on-one or in groups, and avoid what doesn't work.

Resources

As you consider using the knowledge of planning prompts to improve your work with fathers, consider the following resources:

- The book *The Small B!G: Small Changes that Spark Big Influence* by Steve Martin, Noah Goldstein, and Robert Cialdini.
- The book *Yes!: 50 Secrets from the Science of Persuasion* by Noah Goldstein, Steve Martin, and Robert Cialdini.
- The book *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion* by Robert Cialdini

Don't forget to look for more posts and reference guides in this series!