



Pilot Study of a Program to Increase Mothers' Understanding of Dads

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Abstract

The present study evaluated the effects of mothers' participation in an eight week intervention program, Understanding Dad™, on mothers' relationship awareness, knowledge of healthy coparenting relationships, and relationship self-efficacy. Thirty-four mothers were recruited from four sites to participate in a study that used a pretest/post-test one-group design. Over the course of this eight week program, mothers demonstrated moderate to large gains in each of the outcome measures, after controlling for mothers' educational level. Moreover, there was one significant within-subjects interaction effect for time × location. That is, mothers made significantly greater gains in pro-relationship knowledge in one of the intervention sites. Implications for future research are discussed.

Key words: coparenting, gatekeeping, responsible fatherhood, relationship awareness

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Society is increasingly demanding that men who bear children assume an active, nurturing father role. A growing body of research literature has also documented the many factors that influence the extent to which fathers are involved with their children (Holmes & Huston, 2010). One factor that has received considerable attention by researchers and practitioners in recent years is the influence that mothers have on fathers' involvement with children (Kulik & Tsoref, 2010). Some of the literature has suggested that mothers exert considerable influence on fathers by engaging in gatekeeping behavior, defined as behaviors that serve to control fathers' access to children, the activities in which they are engaged, and the ways in which fathers interact with their children (authors). More recently, studies have shown that mothers also play a significant role in facilitating fathers' involvement with children (Cannon, Shoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski, 2008). In these instances, mothers encourage and support fathers to become involved with their children. Mothers also influence paternal involvement with children through their engagement in a range of coparenting interactions, defined as "the ways that parents work together in their roles as parents" (Feinberg, 2003, p. 1499).

The influence that mothers have on fathers' involvement with children may be particularly important among low income families because fathers face a greater range of barriers to ongoing engagement as they attempt to stay involved with their children. Low income fathers and mothers are at higher risk of relationship dissolution, including divorce and marital and cohabitation separation (Roy & Smith, 2013). Low income fathers are also more likely to have resided in separate households from their biological children. Fathers who do not reside with their children often do not have regular access to the child and are likely to rely more heavily on a positive coparenting relationship with the mother in order to stay involved with the child. In families where mothers but not fathers share residence with the child, mothers tend to have considerably more control over fathers' engagement with children. Because mothers seem to play a pivotal role in facilitating the father-child relationship, especially in higher risk families (Arendell, 1996; Cannon, Shoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski, 2008; Marsiglio, 1995), practitioners and program developers have suggested that interventions are needed to assist mothers to address their own attitudes and behaviors that influence paternal involvement with children (Pruett, Arthur, Barker, Brown, & Vecere, 2008).

One such program is the "Understanding Dad™" curriculum which was created by National Fatherhood Initiative®, a national non-profit organization, after the organization's staff found an increased demand for additional mother education programs as a result of the implementation by organizations of their "Mom as Gateway™" workshop. The objective of the Understanding Dad™ program is to provide a comprehensive education program for mothers focusing on effective communication skills with one's partner, awareness of the quality of the relationship with one's partner, and conflict resolution. The overall goal of the program is to improve the quality of the relationship between mothers and fathers for the sake of their children. The present study examined the effects of Understanding Dad™ on mothers' attitudes and awareness of the roles that they assume in influencing paternal involvement with children, knowledge of the importance of the father's role and effective coparenting, and on mothers' relationship self-efficacy.

Background

Walker and McGraw (2000) have observed that there is ample evidence suggesting that mothers actively promote relationships between children and fathers. Wives were found to be more influential in involving their husbands in parenting than were husbands in involving their wives in parenting (Belsky, 1979). Even when mothers and fathers get divorced, the mother's support is a key factor in the degree to which fathers participate in coparenting interaction (Braver & O'Connell, 1998; Madden-Derdich & Leonard, 2000).

Others have observed that some mothers exert considerable influence over fathers by limiting their involvement with children (Barry, Smith, Deutsch, & Perry-Jenkins, 2011; Holmes, Dunn, Harper, Dyer, & Day, 2013). Several researchers have found that mothers believe they have primary responsibility for the home and child care (Baber & Monaghan, 1988). Attitudes such as these may occur because women partially define themselves by their ability to influence the domestic domain (LaRossa, 1997). Rutter and Schwartz (2000) have suggested that because women have not been able to accumulate influence readily within the social structure, they have instead sought to obtain power within the family structure.

Studies have also shown a positive association between quality and quantity of mother-father coparenting interactions and fathers' engagement with children (authors; McHale & Irace, 2011). Coparenting interactions that are characterized by high levels of communication and supportiveness, and low levels of conflict and undermining were found to be associated with higher levels of father engagement with children (Bronte-Tinkew, Horowitz, Carrano, 2010; Carlson, McLanahan, Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Several of these studies have also revealed a stronger positive relationship between supportive coparenting and father engagement of the child than between coparenting support and mother engagement of the child (Elliston et al., 2008; Gordon &

Feldman, 2008), further supporting the present study's focus on programs to help mothers to develop healthy coparenting relationships with their partners as a means to facilitate fathers' engagement with their children.

The extent to which mothers support or do not support fathers' involvement with children may be partially related to women's beliefs about the role of fathers (Arendell, 1996; Schoppe-Sullivan & Mangelsdorf, 2013). Mothers who had more liberal attitudes about the father's role in parenting tended to have husbands or partners who participated in more child care (Barnett & Baruch, 1987). Several studies revealed positive associations between the level of paternal involvement with children and mothers' beliefs about the importance of the father role to children (DeLuccie, 1995; Fagan, Newash, & Schloesser, 2000) and mothers' nontraditional gender ideologies (Kulik & Tsoref, 2010). Moreover, mothers' attitudes about the father role seem to be important predictors of father involvement even after accounting for mothers' assessments of their husbands' child care skills and interest in participating in child care (Beitel & Parke, 1998). Mothers' attitudes about father involvement are also likely to be influenced by their own experiences within their family of origin. Mothers who were raised by nurturant and actively involved fathers are likely to expect their child's father to be similarly involved with his children. Together, these findings suggest that programs for mothers should address their attitudes about the fathers of their children. Moreover, programs should assist mothers to reflect on how their attitudes about fathers are linked to their own childhood experiences with their parents. Based on findings of intervention studies demonstrating that relationship education programs can have a positive result on women's attitudes about their partner relationships (Van Epp, Futris, Van Epp, & Campbell, 2008), the "Understanding Dad™" curriculum includes content intended to increase mothers' awareness of and to re-evaluate their *attitudes* about the father's role. The curriculum is also designed to increase mothers' awareness of how their own family of origin impacts how they see fathers' roles and their relationships with fathers. The present study examines the degree to which "Understanding Dad™" may be associated with improved maternal attitudes about fathers' roles.

Mothers' support of paternal involvement with children may also be influenced by the couple's ability to address disagreements about parenting, manage conflict and hostile communications, and resolve problems that arise around coparenting. In essence, mothers and fathers need enhanced relationship skills as a means of ensuring that coparenting responsibilities are carried out effectively. Interventions created to teach relationship skills have shown positive effects on relationship satisfaction and reduced conflict (Hahlweg & Richter, 2010; Ragan, Einhorn, Rhoades, Markman, & Stanley, 2009). Given these potential outcomes, skill enhancement for mothers may result in higher levels of paternal involvement, thus helping the children and family unit.

The "Understanding Dad™" curriculum includes sessions aimed at improving mothers' communication and conflict resolution skills. The focus of the curriculum, however, is on increased knowledge of pro-relationship skills rather than skill development per se. An alternative view about couples' counseling suggests that partners already have the skills necessary to engage in healthy relationships, and instead they just need higher levels of awareness about relationships in order to engage effectively in relationship maintenance (Acitelli, 2001). Recently, Rogge et al. (2013) found that over a three-year period of time, participants in a relationship awareness program had the same rate of relationship satisfaction as did participants in a skills program targeting management of conflict and conflict resolution. Thus, increasing mothers' relationship awareness may be an important component of a program addressing mothers' attitudes about father involvement with children. The "Understanding Dad™" curriculum includes content on mothers' awareness of their relationships with the child's father, including their engagement in gatekeeping and facilitative behaviors towards fathers.

One benefit from the acquisition of improved communication and relationship knowledge and awareness

(or skills) is a sense of self-efficacy for mothers. Bandura (1997) suggests that self-efficacy beliefs affect motivation levels and acquisition of knowledge and skills. A premise of the “Understanding Dad™” curriculum is that through knowledge and increased awareness mothers will gain confidence around their communication and coparenting abilities. More recently, Lent and Lopez (2002) hypothesized that “individuals develop beliefs about the efficacy of other persons in interpersonal contexts, and these beliefs can influence whether they respond to others in supportive or discouraging ways” (pp. 260-261). The present study therefore examines the degree to which mothers’ participation in the “Understanding Dad™” program is associated with an increased sense of relationship self-efficacy.

Current study

The present study evaluated the effects of mothers’ participation in an eight week intervention program, Understanding Dad™, on mothers’ relationship awareness, knowledge of healthy coparenting relationships, and relationship self-efficacy. Due to the fact that the study did not include a control or comparison group, it is not possible to determine from the findings whether the mothers who participated in the program showed significantly greater changes in awareness, knowledge, or self-efficacy than mothers who did not participate in the program. The researchers considered the use of a pretest/post-test only research design to be appropriate given the newness of the curriculum and the lack of available pilot data to justify the use of an experimental research design.

The mothers who were recruited for this pilot study came from four separate locations. Site location was included as a between group variable in the analysis of program effects because different group leaders may have varying effects on mothers. We also conducted a series of bivariate tests to determine whether the sites differed on various maternal characteristics, including mothers’ age, age of children, maternal education, and maternal race/ethnicity.

Researchers have found that the effects of parenting interventions and prevention programs on families can be influenced by characteristics of parents such as parental education. For example, the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project found that children benefit to a greater extent when their mothers had lower levels of education (Love et al., 2012). Other studies have demonstrated that parents with higher levels of education and socio-economic status tend to benefit more from parent training than do their counterparts (Lundahl, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2006). On the basis of these findings, the present study controls for the effects of maternal education level on outcomes associated with participation in the program, Understanding Dad™.

Method

The present study employed a pretest/post-test one-group design. Thirty-four mothers were recruited from four sites to participate in the study. The sites were selected because of previous partnerships and work with the National Fatherhood Initiative®, which developed the curriculum, Understanding Dad™. Specifically, these sites used a three-session intervention program (workshop) called, “Mom as Gateway™” and had expressed interest in additional mother education programs that are more in-depth. Four different classes were conducted, one at a site in Ohio and three at sites in Pennsylvania. The participants were selected by their involvement with the intervention site and their interest in the educational program. The participants were volunteers and there was no refusal of the program by site staff.

Participant Characteristics

The average age of the mothers in the Understanding Dad™ program was 34.5 years with a standard deviation of 11.3 years; the range of ages were 20 to 62 years. Thirty-two participants reported that they were the

mother of their children; two reported not being the biological mother. The average age of the participants' children was 2.29 years, the range of ages being one to six years. About 39% of the participants identified as being black and the remaining 62% were white. Of the 34 participants, 35.3% were married, 38.2% were single or never married, 17.6% were divorced, and 8.8% were separated. Over half of the participants, 52.9%, completed high school or received their GED, 41.2% completed college, and the remaining 5.9% completed graduate school.

Procedure

The organizations that conducted the Understanding Dad™ program received a facilitator's manual, DVD that contains videos used during some sessions, workbooks for the mothers in the program, and collateral materials to market/promote the program. The program included eight sessions that were conducted over an eight week period of time and allotted for two hours per session. Each session focused on a main topic. The first five sessions focused on the mother and her relationships by examining the roles of mothers, connecting with their own fathers' impact on their lives, connecting with their own mothers' impact on their lives, focusing on their own relationships with the fathers of their children, and connecting the impact of these relationships on their children. The last three sessions were geared towards specific knowledge of pro-relationship skills, such as building a foundation for effective communication by looking at patterns of communication, creating an open and safe environment for communication, and learning how to effectively listen to their partner.

Each session was then broken down into five to seven different activities, including handbook work, discussion, presentation, and role play. Additionally, each session provided opportunities for the mothers to gain relationship knowledge and awareness, specifically at the beginning of each session, as well as to learn about relationship skills they could use in their daily lives. At the end of each session, the participants reviewed the material learned and answered a couple of skills and attitude-specific questions. Those questions were similar to those on the pre- and post-test survey and helped the facilitator to gauge the effectiveness of the session. The facilitator helped to guide the discussion and transmit important and relevant knowledge to the participants. As well, during the first and last session (session 1 and 8) participants were given the program evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the program.

Measures

Participants were given a pretest and post-test survey to evaluate the attitudes and knowledge gained from the "Understanding Dad™" curriculum. In addition to collecting basic demographic information from the program participants, the survey used 44 items to gauge mothers' pro-relationship knowledge, self-efficacy, and attitudes. Each set of questions were designed specifically by the creators of the program and are not standardized measures of knowledge, self-efficacy, or attitudes.

Pro-relationship knowledge. This section of the survey was composed of 14 multiple choice questions where there was only one correct answer. The questions were derived from the program curriculum. An example of a question is, "The unrealistic expectations I have of my children's father are _____." There were seven potential responses to this question, including *his fault, my fault, no one's fault, fair, unfair, none of the above, and I'm not sure*. The correct answer is, *unfair*. Another example is, "What causes problems in communication between a mother and father over time?" with six potential answers, including *different communication styles, poor patterns of communication, they hate each other, they come from different backgrounds, none of the above, and I'm not sure*. The correct answer is *poor patterns of communication*. In

the pretest and post-test surveys, the total number of correct responses were summed to determine whether there was an increase in specific pro-relationship knowledge.

Self-efficacy. This section was made up of 15 Likert-scale items. All items began with the same question, “When things are not going well for me, I am confident I can. . . .” Sample questions included, “Have a good relationship with the father of my children,” “Get my point across to the father of my children,” or “Let go of situations over which I have no control.” The participant would have to select from the following responses with scores ranging from 1 to 5: *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Neutral*, *Disagree*, or *Strongly Disagree*. The scores for each item were reverse coded and summed to construct a composite of self-efficacy. Higher total composite demonstrated more confidence and self-efficacy.

Attitudes. In this section participants were asked about their attitudes regarding mother-father relationships. The 15 Likert-scale items included, “A good mother has a good relationship with the father of her children,” or “A good mother asks the father what he wants when she communicates with him.” The participant could respond with either, *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Neutral*, *Disagree*, or *Strongly Disagree*. Similar to the self-efficacy section, the scores for each item were reverse coded and summed to construct a composite of attitudes. Higher total scores demonstrated more positive attitudes about the mother-father relationship.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

A series of ANOVAs and chi-square analyses were conducted to examine the relationship between education level, race, and test location with respect to pretest results. Using one-way ANOVA there were no significant differences found between education levels and the pretest measures for self-efficacy, $F(2, 33) = .06, ns$, attitudes $F(2, 33) = 2.77, ns$, or knowledge, $F(2, 33) = 2.58, ns$. The mothers with college or graduate school education scored higher on each of the composite measures than the mothers with a high school education, but the differences were not significant. There were no significant race/ethnicity or test location effects found for pretest survey results. There was a significant association between mothers’ education levels and site location. Consequently, we included maternal education level as a covariate in subsequent analyses.

Effects of the Intervention

A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there was a difference between the pre- and post-intervention test results for mothers’ self-efficacy, knowledge, and attitude. Location was included as a between factors variable and mothers education level was controlled. There were significant main effects for time (within-subjects effects) for self-efficacy, knowledge, and attitudes. The main effect for time on self-efficacy was $F(1,32) = 8.14, p < .01$, with a large effect size, $\eta^2p = .22$. The main effect for time on knowledge was $F(1,32) = 35.3, p < .001$; the effect size was large, $\eta^2p = .55$. The main effect for time on attitudes was $F(1,32) = 5.73, p = .02$, with an effect size, $\eta^2p = .17$. No between-subjects location effects were found for the dependent variables. There was a within-subjects interaction for time \times location for knowledge, $F(1,32) = 3.61, p = .03$, with an effect size, $\eta^2p = .27$. There were no significant within-subjects interactions for time \times location for self-efficacy or attitudes.

Discussion

We start with a discussion of limitations of this study. Because the research design did not include a control group, the results of this study cannot be used to suggest that Understanding Dad™ had a significant impact on mothers’ pro-relationship knowledge, self-efficacy, or attitudes regarding mother-father relationships. It is

possible, for example, that mothers who do not participate in the intervention would show similar gains in the same outcome measures due to factors such as the passage of time. The use of a pretest/post-test only research design was deemed appropriate for a pilot study of a new curriculum that has not been previously evaluated. Nonetheless, the findings of this study suggest that Understanding Dad™ is a promising new curriculum that may have significant positive effects on mothers' pro-relationship knowledge, self-efficacy, and attitudes regarding mother-father relationships. Over the course of this eight week program, mothers demonstrated moderate to large gains in each of the outcome measures, after controlling for mothers' educational level. Moreover, there was one significant within-subjects interaction effect for time × location. That is, mothers made significantly greater gains in pro-relationship knowledge in one of the intervention sites. This finding may be due to the quality of the group leaders in that intervention site. Research has shown that participants of parent education programs benefit to a greater extent when the group leader is more highly trained or more effective as a facilitator (Green & Documét, 2005).

It is significant to note that assessments of mothers' and fathers' relationship skills were not included in this study. The present study only examined mothers' improved relationship knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy. Although there is research evidence suggesting that knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy are associated with more skillful mother-father coparenting relationships (Segrin & Taylor 2006), we cannot conclude that the intervention program would have similarly positive effects on mothers' coparenting skills. We suggest that the program should be evaluated for such effects. For example, it would be worthwhile to evaluate whether participation in the program is associated with reduced gatekeeping behaviors. It may be necessary to modify the intervention program to address mother-father interaction skills if there are no positive effects on skills associated with participation in this program.

Researchers have found that the effects of parent education programs on parents are often influenced by the parents' education level (Lundahl, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2006). This was not found to be the case in this study, suggesting that mothers of varying education levels may benefit from programs targeting knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy in coparenting relationships. Future studies of this program with larger samples and more rigorous research designs should continue to assess the influence of maternal education level on mothers' outcomes. Furthermore, the results of this study showed a within subjects interaction effect for time and location. Unfortunately, the study did not collect data on the characteristics of the facilitators or the fidelity with which the program was implemented. Such nuanced analyses will be important to implementing more rigorous studies of Understanding Dad™.

Limitations

As noted above, a limitation of this study was the absence of a control group to assess the impact of the intervention. Another limitation of the present study was that there was a small number of participants. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to the U.S. population of mothers. In addition, the study included only mothers who had either high school or college educations, thus it was not representative of the entire mother population. The intervention also may not be effective for use with mothers who have less than a high school education. The results also may be biased because the mothers who participated in the study agreed to participate as a result of their previous involvement with the agency. It is not clear how this sample of mothers differs from other mothers. It is possible that the mothers in this study were more highly committed to the fathers of their children because they sought additional education programs. If that is the case, then the findings may be more representative of mothers with positive partner and coparenting relationships. However, the opposite might be true as well because the participating mothers may have needed greater assistance with maintaining positive relationships with the fathers of their children. Moreover, the

survey did not use standardized measures, therefore, validity cannot be tested for the survey measures.

Conclusion

Understanding Dad™ is a new curriculum intended to assist mothers to be more knowledgeable, aware, confident, and skillful at engaging in coparenting relationships with their child's father. This pilot study showed that the participation of this small group of mothers in the program was associated with improved knowledge, attitudes, and self-efficacy, although the lack of a control group means that the impact of the intervention cannot be determined. The results using this small sample suggest that Understanding Dad™ is a promising new curriculum that should be more rigorously evaluated using a larger sample of mothers and employing a control group. The findings are also consistent with the idea that coparenting interventions may be effective when only one parent, and not both parents, attend the program. However, future evaluations should use more rigorous methods to assess whether programs are equally effective when only mothers are involved versus when mothers and fathers attend a program.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics (N = 34)

	%	M (SD)
Mother's age		34.5 (11.3)
Mother type		
Biological	94	
Other mother	6	
Number of children		2.29 (1.7)
Black	38.2	
White	61.8	
Level of education		
High School	52.9	
College	41.2	
Graduate School	5.9	
Marital status		
Married	35.3	
Single/never married	38.2	
Divorced	17.6	
Separated	8.8	

Table 2. Repeated Measures ANOVA for Pretest and Post-Test

	Within-Subjects Effect					Between-Subjects Effect			Within-Subjects Effect		
	Pre	Post	Time			Location			Time × Location		
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2p	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2p	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	η^2p
Self-Efficacy	49.03(10.4)	57(8.2)	8.14	.008	.22	.66	.58	.06	.32	.81	.03
Knowledge	4.71(2.13)	9(3.3)	35.37	.000	.55	1.3	.30	.12	3.61	.03	.27
Attitude	49.24(8.11)	54.38(6.54)	5.73	.02	.17	.71	.55	.07	.94	.44	.09

p* < 0.05. *p* < 0.01. *** *p* < 0.001. Notes. ANOVA = analysis of variance. We controlled for maternal education.