

8 CUTTING EDGE IDEAS

To **Super-Charge** Your
Fatherhood Program

About National Fatherhood Initiative

Creating a world in which every child has a 24/7 Dad.SM

National Fatherhood Initiative® (NFI) is the nation's leading non-profit organization working to end father absence. Underlying many of society's most pressing challenges is a lack of father involvement in their children's lives.

Our Mission

National Fatherhood Initiative® (NFI) transforms organizations and communities by equipping them to intentionally and proactively engage fathers in their children's lives.

Our Vision

National Fatherhood Initiative's vision is for every child to grow up with an involved, responsible, and committed father.

To see more about our mission, our partners, our impact, and how we can help you engage fathers, please visit www.fatherhood.org

For fatherhood and family resources, including curricula, resources, and other helpful materials, please visit www.fathersource.org.

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Introduction

As the nation's #1 provider of fatherhood skill-building programs and resources, NFI continually provides guidance for practitioners and organizations on how they can provide the most robust and successful fatherhood programs possible. To that end, this eBook includes 8 ideas for how to super-charge your fatherhood program. These ideas draw on some of the latest cognitive and behavioral research, and how you can apply this research to your program.

Given that this eBook focuses on research, you might wonder whether it will be dry and include information only an academic can understand. Don't worry; we'll explain each area of research in its own chapter in easy-to-understand terms, followed by simple examples and tips for applying this research to your work with fathers. You'll also find some additional resources at the end of each chapter (e.g. websites and books) that will increase your knowledge in each area.

If you apply what you learn, before you know it, you might even become the fatherhood scientist in your organization!

In any case, we hope this information helps you super-charge your fatherhood program and find even more success with the fathers you serve.

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

Idea 1: Cues, Triggers, and Nudges

This first chapter on **cues, triggers, and nudges** will help you understand ways in which you could make it more likely fathers will habitually participate in a service, workshop, or program. It could also help fathers develop the habits of good fathering above and beyond reliance on the resources (e.g. programs/curricula) you might currently use.

The Research

Research on power of habits in our lives, how to create word-of-mouth marketing, and how to create small and large-scale initiatives that improve decision-making provides insight into how organizations and practitioners might be able to use cues, triggers, and nudges to improve the effectiveness of a service, workshop, or program for fathers.

- **Cues** are stimuli in the environment that lead to developing a routine that is the basis for a habit. On the other side of the routine is a reward. (Cues, routines, and rewards go hand in hand in creating a habit.) Charles Duhigg in *The Power of Habit* describes the research on the power of habits and the role that cues perform in creating them.
- **Triggers** are “stimuli that prompt people to think about related things.”¹ They are, quite simply, reminders to engage in a specific behavior. They are the foundation for **word-of-mouth**, which is the most impactful form of advertising/promotion for a fatherhood workshop or program. They help generate more word-of-mouth. Jonah Berger in *Contagious* describes the research on the role that triggers play in keeping behaviors top of mind (e.g. attending a fatherhood program) and in generating word-of-mouth (e.g. advertising a fatherhood program).
- **Nudges** are small changes in the world around us (environment) that influence us to make better decisions. More specifically: “Nudges are ways of influencing choice without limiting the choice set or making alternatives appreciably more costly in terms of time, trouble, social sanctions, and so forth. They are called for because of flaws in individual decision-making, and they work by making use of those flaws.”² A nudge is not an economic incentive in which choice is eliminated (e.g. a father who owes child support will go to jail if he doesn’t attend a fatherhood program—a hammer, not a nudge), a motivator that has been used widely by fatherhood programs. Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein in *Nudge* describe the research on how nudges improve decision-making.

Ideas on Application

As Duhigg points out in *The Power of Habit*, it is easier for someone to establish good habits, and change poor ones, when part of a group (community). One reason why groups are so powerful in helping people to change behavior is that they help people see that change is possible (e.g. they see that it happens in others like them), which then makes it easier to believe that change is possible. Belief in the ability to change is critical to change. If you have seen fathers change as a result of participating in a fatherhood program, you know firsthand the power of groups.

¹ Berger, J. (2013). *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*. New York: Simon & Schuster

² Hausman, D., & Welch, B. (2010). Debate: To nudge or not to nudge. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 18, 123-136.

Cues, triggers, and nudges are very similar in that they involve the influence of stimuli in the environment—stimuli that in some cases already exist while in other cases they’re “introduced”—on individual behavior. They involve influencing the behavior of individuals that are part of a defined group (e.g. a customer segment or fathers). And, perhaps most importantly in working with fathers, they can involve influencing behaviors that individuals repeatedly perform. So for the purposes of working with fathers, the minor distinction between cues, triggers, and nudges is not important, even though it’s helpful to understand the distinction.

Here is a list of ideas for integrating cues, triggers, and nudges into a service, workshop, or program that could help you address two major pain points—retention of fathers and consistent involvement of fathers in their children’s lives. Think of ways in which you could apply these ideas to each pain point.

- Direct each father to select an easy, frequent, strong (obvious) cue and a powerful reward for him to engage in the behavior (regular attendance or consistent involvement in his child’s life) that doesn’t exist in his environment. Choose a cue that is customized to each father’s circumstances (e.g. access to his children) and a reward that is, ideally, emotional so that it will stand a good chance of reinforcing the behavior every time he engages in it.
- As an alternative or in addition to working with each father, help your fatherhood group select a cue and reward that doesn’t exist in the fathers’ environments and that all of them can implement. Each father can report at the start or end of each time they get together on how well the cue and reward worked in helping him engage in the behavior.
- Lead each father, or the group, to identify bad habits that keep them from engaging in the behavior. This identification will involve naming the cues, routines (behaviors), and rewards for these bad habits. Research shows that you should focus on changing the behavior (routine) when trying to change a bad habit rather than trying to change the cue or reward. This idea involves identifying a competing habit (cue-routine/behavior-reward system) that keeps a father from regular attendance or consistent involvement in the life of his child. Help the father see how he can respond to the cue with the behavior you want him to engage in (rather than the competing behavior) and how the new behavior can be reinforced by the same reward.
- Call or send e-mail or text reminders to specific fathers or the entire group in between phases of a service, workshop, or program sessions as a trigger (reminder) to attend the next one or engage in a specific action of involvement in their children’s lives. This idea will keep the behavior “top of mind.” Consider asking each father at the end of his time with you or the group, for example, to identify a specific action he will take to be involved in his child’s life before you or the group see him again. Send an e-mail or text reminder, one or more times, to take that action before you or the group see him again.
- Create a “buzz” around a service, workshop, or program by getting graduates (alumni) to generate “ongoing” word-of-mouth by talking with potential participants about how much they loved/benefited from it.
- Link the behavior to a frequent trigger that already exists in a father’s environment. Consider what a father does on an every day (or almost every day) basis. Could you, for example, create a simple reminder card or magnet a father could attach to his bathroom mirror so that every time he shaves he’s reminded to attend the next program session?

- Link the behavior to a trigger that happens near where the behavior will or should take place. If a father receives a service or participates in another program at the same location as the workshop or program he also participates in, could you include a reminder as part of that other service or program to attend the next part or session of the fatherhood workshop or program?
- A nudge can involve a financial incentive as long as it doesn't limit the choices available to a father. Some organizations have found, for example, that fathers who owe child support are more likely to attend a fatherhood program when the organization works with courts to reduce child support orders (e.g. make them more affordable) or eliminate some arrears in exchange for participation in the program.
- Consider non-financial nudges that have been used in other social-service programs or fields and see how they work with fathers. You could try journaling for instance. Encourage fathers in your program to journal daily or weekly about their attempts to become more involved dads. (Consider assigning journaling as "homework" between program sessions.) Some job-placement programs in the United Kingdom have found that when participants journal about their experiences trying to find jobs that they are more persistent in their efforts to land jobs. You could also implement a checklist of father-involvement behaviors tailored for your group (e.g. a group of non-custodial dads) or each father. Researchers in healthcare have found that using checklists in U.S. operating rooms that include procedures vital to reducing the risk of patient deaths actually reduce deaths. Similarly, fathers who use a father-involvement checklist might become more involved than they would otherwise.

Regardless of how you apply cues, triggers, and nudges, 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 cues, triggers, and nudges to improve retention and fathers' involvement in the lives of their children, review the following resources:

- The books *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*, *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*, and *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*.
- Charles Duhigg summary of how habits work including role of cues @ <http://charlesduhigg.com/how-habits-work/>
- Jonah Berger on triggers (video interview and transcript) @ <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/contagious-jonah-berger-on-why-things-catch-on/>
- A Practitioner's Guide to Nudging @ <http://www.rotman.utoronto.ca/-/media/Images/Programs-and-Areas/behavioural-economics/GuidetoNudging-Rotman-Mar2013.pdf>.
- Nudge Database @ http://economicspsychologypolicy.blogspot.com/2013/03/nudge-database_3441.html.

Idea 2: Autonomy, Mastery, and Purpose

In this second chapter you will find ideas on how you might integrate research on **autonomy, mastery, and purpose** into your work with fathers. Integrating this research could help you **better motivate fathers** to be the best dads they can be. It could also help you motivate fathers to enroll in and habitually attend your fatherhood program because helping fathers achieve autonomy, mastery, and purpose will add value to your program from fathers' perspective.

The Research

Daniel Pink in *Drive*³ captures the research on what motivates humans. He provides insight into the three elements that are crucial to motivating people to take action regardless of the situation. When people feel they have **autonomy, mastery, and purpose** in their lives generally or around a specific situation (e.g. making decisions about how to parent their children, decisions regarding their jobs, etc.), they are more likely to be motivated, or driven. They are also more likely to feel a sense of well-being.

- **Autonomy** means that a person has the freedom to make his or her own decisions. Autonomous people have control over their decisions. Pink points out that being autonomous isn't synonymous with independence because a person can be autonomous in an interdependent situation, such as parenting in which a father and mother depend on each other to raise their child. **Autonomy is critical for engagement.**
- **Mastery** means that a person has command over something, such as knowledge about how to be an effective parent and skill in how to care for a child's needs. To attain mastery, a person must desire to become better and better at something **that matters**, such as how to be a better father and husband/partner. The engagement that comes from autonomy is critical to a person's desire to master something. For someone to master something, they must understand three things: 1) it is possible to become better at something, 2) it is hard work (a pain) to become better at something, and 3) it is never possible to attain complete mastery, only to get closer to it over time.
- **Purpose** means that a person has a reason for doing something and involves determination, as in a person being driven to be a better parent by a greater objective than just being a better parent. Intrinsic motivation (i.e. driven by something inside of them) is crucial to sustained purpose. If someone is only extrinsically motivated (i.e. driven by something outside of them), purpose won't stand the test of time. Motivation will be fleeting at best.

These three elements are like the legs of a three-legged stool. They work together to support the base of the stool (e.g. the skill someone seeks to obtain), but it is purpose that is the most vital of the three elements. While people who have a high level of autonomy and mastery at something can be very effective at that something, people who have both of those elements and **a clear purpose behind what they're doing** are even more effective.

³ Pink, D. (2009). *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Ideas on Application

This three-element framework is a good one for assessing how well your current fatherhood program motivates fathers. If you don't yet have a program, it offers a good framework for developing one that will leverage fathers' motivators.

A well-designed fatherhood program can give fathers a sense of autonomy and help fathers build toward mastery in fathering knowledge and skills. Regarding autonomy, a program must help them move toward greater engagement in the lives of their children. Here's how.

- It should be balanced from a prescriptive and non-prescriptive perspective. It should balance research-based, prescriptive content (e.g. tips) on what makes for effective parenting regardless of fathers' individual circumstances (e.g. knowledge of child development and how to apply effective discipline techniques) with general guidance that allows fathers to choose how to be good fathers given their individual circumstances (e.g. how to be involved in their children's lives if they have regular versus limited or no access to their children). If you've ever watched the movie *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*, think about how Captain Barbossa (the villain) defines the third rule of the pirate's code known as *parley* when he captures the beautiful heroine: "The code is more what you'd call 'guidelines' than actual rules. Welcome aboard the Black Pearl, Miss Turner."
- It should include wrap-around services necessary for some fathers to overcome challenges that present barriers to a sense of autonomy (i.e. the sense that they have as much control as possible over their fatherhood-related decisions). These are services provided by your organization or partner organizations that address the pressing needs that fathers might have that aren't directly related to parenting and fathering knowledge or skills, such as the need for a job, a high school diploma or GED, visitation rights, or affordable child support. Because fathers' needs can be a moving target, it's essential to assess their needs before, during, and after they participate in a fatherhood program so that your program always has a beat on the pulse of fathers' most pressing needs.

Regarding mastery, a program should:

- Be research-based in its content. Simply put, it should include content on what works that is based on research and evidence. (Such programs are alternatively called research- or evidence-informed.) The facilitator of the program (whether delivered in a group-based or one-on-one setting) must be clear with fathers that: 1) it is possible to become better at being a father regardless of circumstance, 2) it is hard work (a pain) to become a better father, and 3) it is never possible to attain complete mastery in parenting and fathering, only to get closer to them over time.
- Include opportunities for fathers to apply, or at least reflect upon, what they learn. Research shows that parent-education programs with application components are extremely effective. Ideally, fathers would go home after learning a new discipline skill, for example, and try it when their children need to be disciplined and then have the opportunity to share that experience and receive constructive feedback. Unfortunately, that's not possible for some fathers (e.g. non-custodial) to apply some of what they learn often or at all. Programs should include tools that allow for customized application of

what fathers learn, such as action steps fathers can take between sessions, or a close approximation, such as role-plays and time for reflection on how they might or would apply what they learn.

- Include an alumni component that allows fathers who “graduate” from a program to continue to build toward mastery around parenting, fathering, and related issues (e.g. relationships). Fathers become hungry for more as their sense of autonomy and mastery develops. The organizations that use NFI’s programs have found that fathers often want to re-enroll in a program they have already completed to continue, in large part, their learning. By offering additional programs or workshops of any length in a sequence, your organization can help fathers continue to build toward mastery.

Purpose is a bit trickier. As Pink points out, building autonomy and toward mastery will increase the chances that someone will become more motivated. Certainly a good fatherhood program that addresses the first two legs of the stool will get you two-thirds of the way there. Organizations that run NFI’s programs have found that just by participating in a fatherhood program, fathers develop a greater sense of purpose in being a great dad. We find that the energy and enthusiasm facilitators bring can help fathers find their purpose. Unfortunately, only fathers can find and unlock the intrinsic motivation associated with a greater purpose in being a great dad.

This is where you must get creative. You must first determine whether fathers are extrinsically or intrinsically motivated to participate in your program. Doing so will help you identify the fathers who, because they’re intrinsically motivated, are more likely to engage with the program and consistently attend and those whose extrinsic motivation, while necessary to get them to attend initially, will make it more difficult for them to engage with the program and more likely to participate infrequently or drop out. You’ll have to spend more time with the latter group to help them find their purpose.

The best time to identify fathers’ motivators is before you start to work with them one-on-one or in a group. Regardless of setting, you could schedule one-on-one time with each father before you start your work with him. If you will work with fathers in a group, you could bring the entire group in for an “introductory session” before the first session. Either way, use the following two-step approach to identify fathers’ motivators.

- **Step 1:** Ask fathers either or both of the following questions. What is the main reason you’re in this program? When it comes to being involved in your child’s (children’s) life, what keeps you up at night?”
- **Step 2:** Use the “5 Whys” line of questioning to go even deeper and help fathers uncover their truest (or deepest) motivators. It works like this. Ask the fathers either of the questions above. After they provide their answers, and regardless of the content of their answers, simply ask “Why?” or “Why is that?” Don’t say anything else. Don’t pass judgment on their answers. After the fathers’ second answers, again ask “Why?” or “Why is that?” Continue this line of questioning until you’ve questioned their answers five times. By the fifth time, you should have identified fathers’ truest motivators. It’s like peeling back the skin of an onion. Using the 5 Whys can seem awkward at first, but keep at it.

The beauty of this approach is that it can help fathers unlock the motivators they didn’t even know they had. Fathers whose initial responses might indicate extrinsic sources of motivation might instead (or in addition) have intrinsic sources. Write down their answers so you

remember them and so that you can identify the fathers with whom you might need to work more diligently to engage with the program and consistently attend. When fathers encounter obstacles to being involved with their children or attending the program, or are just having a bad day, use what you learn to remind fathers why they're going through the program. You can also use this approach as the program progresses (e.g. halfway through and at the end of the program) to see whether fathers' motivators change.

Regardless of how you apply autonomy, mastery, and purpose, 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 apply the autonomy, mastery, and purpose framework to increase fathers' motivation, consider reading [Drive](#) and the following book: [Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#) by Carol Dweck. This book focuses on the research that shows people can develop and grow throughout their lives, and that nothing is set in stone. It can further inform you about mastery, in particular.

Idea 3: Framing and the “No Choice Option”

This third chapter provides ideas on how you might integrate research on no choice options (a form of framing) into your work with fathers. Integrating this research could help you help fathers to be more persistent in sticking with the behaviors of an involved, responsible, committed father.

The Research

Daniel Kahneman in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*⁴ captures the research on the biases humans suffer from in making decisions, regardless of the decisions they make. He describes how we rely on two cognitive systems when making decisions. **System 1** “operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control.” We often call it our “gut instinct.” **System 2** “allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations” and involves deliberate choice. We often call it our “rational side.”

We primarily rely on System 1 to make most of our decisions. The good news is that our gut reactions are right most of the time. But it is inadequate for making decisions that require a lot of thought and energy, which is where System 2 comes in. In addition to being inadequate for making complex decisions, the problem with System 1 is that it often leads us astray—and wildly so—which can get us into all sorts of trouble.

The reason it leads us astray is that it relies on *heuristics*, what we often call “rules of thumb.” These rules of thumb give us a starting point from which to base our decisions. The problem is that these rules of thumb are often wholly inadequate for helping us make sound decisions because, while they help us arrive at good decisions much of the time, they can bias our thinking in ways that lead to poor decisions in many instances.

One of the heuristics System 1 employs that biases our decision-making is called the *framing effect*. Our decisions are influenced by the way in which decisions are presented. Here’s a great example from Kahneman’s book:

- Research presented doctors with statistics about outcomes for cancer treatment in two different ways—survival rates and mortality rates—and asked them whether they would recommend surgery or radiation as the course of treatment. Specifically: the 1-month survival rate of surgery is 90 percent vs. there is a 10 percent mortality rate in the first month after surgery. Despite the fact that the data are exactly the same, just presented or framed differently, a much higher percentage of doctors selected surgery when framed from a survival than mortality perspective. Why? Because even among people trained to treat cancer, mortality is viewed as bad and survival as good. Survival sounds encouraging while mortality is defeating.

Think about your own life for a moment. If you were given a diagnosis of cancer and presented with treatment options, would you rather the doctor talk about your chances of survival or death?

⁴ Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

The point is we're all subject to biases. The fact that I picked this research to write about is in part influenced by another heuristic called the *availability bias*. In the past year, I've read no less than 3 books on biases!

For the purposes of this paper, framing involves how practitioners present fathers with choices related to being an involved, responsible, committed father, regardless of context (e.g. one-on-one case management or in a group-based program) or topic (e.g. discipline, co-parenting, and child support). Before you read another sentence after this one, take a few minutes to reflect on how you present fathers with choices and write them down.

Chances are you present them with several or many choices to choose from. And each of the choices you present are ones that you'd be fine with them choosing. You might, for example, provide them with several choices for how they can do fun things with their children that they might not have thought about before and ask them to commit to doing one or more of them within a specific time frame. Fair enough. But did you also provide them with the choice to do none of them and maintain the status quo? I doubt it. After all, why in the heck would you want to give fathers an option to do nothing? Wouldn't that make you a bad practitioner?

To answer those questions, let's turn to [research](#) conducted by Dr. Rom Schrift and Dr. Jeffrey Parker on whether presenting people with a no choice option along with other choices makes any difference in how committed or persistent people are in sticking with their choices (not the no choice option). The results are especially important in working with fathers because one of your primary objectives for fathers should be that they are persistent (committed) in sticking with being an involved, committed, responsible father, generally, and implementing certain behaviors, specifically. Persistence is vital to fathers, particularly those who face challenging barriers to involvement in the lives of their children.

Although these researchers don't mention framing specifically, their research is all about framing.⁵ Using a variety of experiments that addressed different behaviors, they found that offering a no choice option alongside other healthy or pro-social options increased the persistence of participants in sticking to the choices they made compared to participants who were given the same choices but without a no choice option. They found it critical that the no choice option was presented up front with all of the other choices, not before and not after the other choices.

Rules for Application

Use this simple and powerful framing effect to encourage persistence in fathers, particularly in those who face adversity. Here are two simple rules to follow when presenting dads with options on how to be an involved, responsible, committed father in any setting (e.g. one-on-one case management) and on any topic (e.g. discipline, co-parenting, and child support).

- Rule #1: Ensure that the no choice option is viable, even though it's not desirable. If a father happens to choose that option, it must not violate a legal agreement, for example, and not result in harm to the father or anyone else.
- Rule #2: Always present the no choice option alongside other options, not before or after.

⁵ Interestingly and ironically, they use the term "choice architecture" when referring to how they presented choices. That term was coined by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein in *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (2008).

Regardless of how you apply the framing effect, 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 apply the framing effect to increase fathers' persistence in following through on their choices, consider reading the [article](#) on Shrift's and Parker's research and the books [Thinking, Fast and Slow](#) and [Nudge](#).

Idea 4: The Power of the “Deviant Dad”

This fourth chapter provides ideas on how you might integrate research on **positive deviance** into your work with fathers. Integrating this research can help you identify model fathers who have overcome great odds to become involved, responsible, committed fathers, models you can share with other fathers who struggle to do the same.

The Research

In the *Power of Positive Deviance*⁶, Richard Pacale, Jerry Sternin, and Monique Sternin chronicle the research and share many diverse examples of how professionals have used **positive deviance** to create positive behavior change in populations across the globe. Don't be thrown by the negative connotation that the word “deviance” might have for you. As the authors point out, **positive deviance** refers to “outliers who succeed against all odds.” Furthermore,

*Positive deviance (PD) is founded on the premise that at least one person in a community, working with the same resources as everyone else, has already licked the problem that confounds others. The individual is an outlier in the statistical sense—an exception, someone whose outcome **deviates in a positive way** (emphasis added) from the norm.*

They share examples of how professionals have created programs to address such wide-ranging subjects as improving child nutrition (Vietnam), reducing female circumcision (Egypt), reducing hospital infections (United States), and reintegrating abducted girls—turned into soldiers after abduction—back into the community (Uganda).

What links all of these examples, and is a hallmark of using positive deviance, was the use of ethnographic research methods, primarily observation, to identify outliers who engage in positive behavior (i.e. the innovation in the community) to produce the outcomes the professionals sought (e.g. children who were well nourished and girls who weren't circumcised), and then to understand the steps (process) that the outliers followed to produce the outcomes. The professionals used what they learned to design programs that had community involvement—indeed that were primarily community run—that spread knowledge and skill development related to the behaviors that led to the positive outcomes.

Another example in the book, which is relevant to working with fathers, involved the use of positive deviance by the international non-profit Save the Children to reduce infant mortality among the Pashtun-speaking people who live in the remote mountains of northwest Pakistan. The following description uses excerpts from the book. (Pardon the length of this example. The length provides the breadth necessary to grasp the power of using positive deviance.)

The Pashtun-speaking people in the remote mountains of North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan, endure one of the world's highest infant mortality rates. One of every twenty newborns dies within the first year of life. A fiercely independent people, their communities have a long history of rebuffing the efforts of health authorities to address this problem. Recognizing these inhibiting features as conditions in which positive deviance often flourishes, Save the Children resolved to give the process a try.

⁶ Pascale, R., Sternin, J., & Sternin, M. (2010). *The Power of Positive Deviance: How Unlikely Innovators Solve the World's Toughest Problems*. Boston: Harvard Business Press.

So how does one coax a community into tackling a problem it has never acknowledged as such? Most were aware that infant mortality was among the highest in all of Pakistan (85 deaths in every 1,000 births). Yet leaders and villagers were inured to all this as “Allah’s will.”

It was agreed that a good initial step would be to create reliable maps of recent village experience with newborn survival. That very evening, the first of what was to become a number of such efforts took shape with improvised materials representing houses, streets, mosque, and market-place. Hunkered on the ground, using colored felt-tipped pens to code stones into categories (e.g. families with no children, families that had lost a newborn since the previous Ramadan, etc.) the men created an epidemiological map. A green dot on a village home denoted a newborn who had survived. Black denoted less fortunate households. Orange, yellow, brown, and purple indicated cause of death—umbilical chord infection, asphyxia, diarrhea, hypothermia, or extremely low birth weight. Participants became wholly engrossed. Why had some newborns, born under exactly the same conditions as those who died, survived and flourished? These conversations would ultimately pierce the shroud of “Allah’s will.”

As the men were compiling census data, a parallel endeavor unfolded among the women. In their case, beans were the artifact of choice for the mapping process. Analogous to the Eskimos’ proverbial twenty-three words for “snow,” Pashtun women traffic in the currency of beans, a staple of everyday diet. Differences between beans are subtle to the untrained eye but as distinct as words in a dictionary for the literate. The women’s maps had deeper texture. They understood precisely what went on in the first two to three weeks after each child was born. Considerable care was devoted to creating these epidemiological maps. They captured who was born, who died; babies that had diarrhea, were underweight, or experienced respiratory difficulties or umbilical cord infections but survived. The end result was a composite picture of the men’s and women’s efforts.

Unsurprisingly, the ensuing process was not conducted as “interviews” but informed through stories. Pashtun life is captured in oral tradition. While there are no written diaries or civic records, memories provide an astonishing wealth of detail. When a baby is born, neighboring women visit, discuss, observe, and commit to memory what happened and how. To accommodate this tradition, tactile objects such as homemade stuffed dolls were employed to capture what people do, not what they know. This impelled the classic shift from the “what” to the “how.” Enactment confirmed that many households delivered the baby in an animal shed because delivery was regarded as messy. Some sessions evoked stoic accounts of tragedy as mothers-in-laws, new mothers, and traditional birth attendants (dais) elaborated on infants that had turned blue and died a few hours after a winter delivery. Reenactment with rag dolls and crude material substituting for umbilical cord and placenta revealed how the dais attention switches from the newborn to the mother as soon as the baby is born. Miriam, one of the oldest and most respected dais in the village, enacted the common practice of placing the naked newborn on the mud floor so those present could blow prayers over it. In the cold Haripur winter (with no source of heat and insulating blanket between baby and damp earth), hypothermia was the unintended result.

Once common practices had been captured, it was time for the PD inquiry itself—the search of PD’s. Earlier mapping helped the group identify families who had “at risk”

newborns who had survived against all odds. Small groups of male volunteers joined Shafique and his team to visit and chat with the male members of these families to find out what they had done. A similar process took place among the women. Pashtun tradition is exquisitely sensitive to not awarding social recognition to one person at the expense of others. It was understood that “heroes” would not be singled out—rather, discoveries would highlight successful practices, not individuals.

One mother-in-law mentioned using a gadeya (pillow). “Why?” the visitors asked. “Before the baby arrives,” she answered, “I make a special pillow of rages to put on the floor and to cover the baby when it is born.” “Show us,” the visitors requested. She did. A member of the visiting team, a mother-in-law herself, interjected: “I do something similar. I immediately put the baby to the mother’s breast and put a blanket on it.”

The men’s visits with male relatives shed light on the PD practice of using a clean razor blade to cut the umbilical chord. One PD husband had created a “clean delivery kit.” Another took his wife to the clinic for a prenatal exam. The list of practical and successful expedients gradually expanded.

In parallel conversations, men and women discussed their findings. At times this triggered heated debate. Vetting ensured the most relevant strategies and practices would gain ascendance. Convergence wasn’t always easy.

It was time to share discoveries with the larger community. Separate male and female community meetings were carefully choreographed to share the findings from the home visits. Eager villagers came together to hear about some of the secrets that could save newborn lives. The design of this phase gave testimony to the villagers’ latent creativity, confirming yet again that a community knows best how to engage its own.

Dissemination workshops tended to follow a trajectory. They led off with an introduction of technical PD practices (e.g. clean razor blades) but turned inevitably to the importance of the husband’s involvement and support of his wife. One violated a cultural taboo by giving his pregnant wife special food (trespassing on the mother-in-law’s authority). Then questions began: “What do you think of this?” “How about a husband taking his wife to the prenatal clinic?” “Where do you draw the line?”

At the conclusion of the community meetings, volunteers gathered to develop a strategy to enable the whole community to practice the successful but sometimes controversial strategies that had resulted in newborn survival. It was decided that the men should gather once a month at the tea shop in their mohallahs (neighborhood meetings), recount stories of recent newborns, discuss what they should do, learn more about pregnancy and delivery, and perhaps practice some new behaviors. Women developed a similar plan for monthly mohallah sessions where more elaborate new behaviors were practiced as well as stories of deliveries where the new behaviors were adopted.

The point, of course, was to reinforce the focus on the effect of PD practices and to highlight the importance of the participation of both mothers and fathers in the survival and well-being of their children.

The point, of course, is not that this example has direct application to increasing father involvement in this country. It shows, however, that even in a culture in which fathers were involved only at the margins in an aspect of child well-being that the use of positive deviance can overcome extremely challenging barriers to greater father involvement.

Ideas on Application

The PD approach the authors outline involves much more than simply finding outliers. It involves getting a community to own a problem and then mobilizing the community to solve the problem. Nevertheless, you can use the “finding outliers” portion of this approach to identify models of fathers who have overcome great odds to become an involved, responsible, committed father that you can share with other fathers. You might also be able to involve fathers in developing an approach that will help other fathers to overcome great odds. Involving model fathers to influence other fathers will increase buy-in from other fathers because the solutions come from and are delivered by fathers like them. Here are some ideas to consider.

- If you work with a father (one-on-one or in a group setting) who is involved, responsible, and committed in the lives of his children, ask him how he became a good father. Ask him questions, such as:
 - » How did you become involved in the lives of your children?
 - » What barriers did you face in becoming involved?
 - » What steps did you take to overcome that (those) barrier(s)? (Or) How did you solve the problem(s) that (those) barrier(s) presented?
 - » What advice would you give to a father who faces the same barrier(s)?
 - » Keep an open mind to how the father overcame the odds. Resist judging his solutions. Pay particular attention to uncommon or unusual solutions the father developed. If after he shares his experience you think he provides a good model for you to share with other fathers, ask him whether he'd be willing to share his story. He could share through you via a case study you could write on his story. If he is part of a group of fathers you work with, ask him to share during a group meeting/session.
- If you don't work with such a father, commit now to finding such a father so you can eventually apply the idea above.
- If you're fortunate enough to work with several fathers who have overcome great odds, ask them whether they will volunteer to develop an approach to sharing their experience with other fathers, and whether they will share their experience. (Some or all of these model fathers will act as spokespersons, so they must be reliable and credible. Be careful in your choice of them.) If they are willing, gather them (e.g. in a focus group) and ask them the kinds of questions identified above. Then have them design an approach that focuses on strategies and tactics (i.e. specific behaviors rather than simply sharing knowledge) for overcoming barriers that will help other fathers become involved in their children's lives. Focus them on the “how to” of transferring these behaviors to other fathers. Consider asking the fathers to not only develop an approach for transferring behaviors to fathers served by your organization, but to include ways to transfer those behaviors to fathers they can access in other parts of the community. You will probably have to hold several meetings to use this approach.

Regardless of how you apply positive deviance, 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 apply positive deviance to identify models of fathers who have overcome great odds to become an involved, responsible, committed father, consider reading [*Power of Positive Deviance*](#). We also recommend the book [*Switch*](#), which discusses a similar idea the authors call following the “Bright Spots” (i.e. find what’s working and “clone it.”). This similar idea is part of a larger framework (the Switch Framework) that you might find useful in your work.

Idea 5: Keystone Habits

In this fifth chapter, we will cover ideas on how you might integrate research on **keystone habits**. Integrating this research could make it easier for you to help fathers to identify the most significant barriers that keep them from being as involved in their children's lives as they'd like to be. It could also help fathers develop the habits of good fathering above and beyond reliance on the resources (e.g. programs/curricula) you might currently use.

In the first chapter of this guide (*Cues, Triggers, and Nudges*), we introduced you to research from Charles Duhigg's book *The Power of Habit*⁷ and how organizations and practitioners can use this research to improve the effectiveness of a service, workshop, or program for fathers. In discussing the role of cues, we described the research Duhigg highlights on the power of habits and the role they play in our lives.

This chapter focuses on another important aspect of the research Duhigg highlights: the concept of **keystone habits**.

These are the habits that matter more than others in changing unhealthy behaviors or developing healthy ones. **As you can imagine, keystone habits are very important as they relate to father absence and encouraging father involvement... more on that soon.**

But let's begin by sharing one of Duhigg's diverse examples of keystone habits and their importance in triggering a cascade of change: integrating exercise.

As Duhigg points out, research shows that when people start habitually exercising, they usually:

- Eat better
- Smoke less
- Become more productive at work
- Show more patience
- Feel less stressed
- Use their credit cards less often

Yes. They even become more financially responsible, at least in a specific way.

That kind of change might seem odd until you realize that exercise has a spillover or cascade effect that triggers other healthy habits because it makes other habits easier. Think of the power of exercise as the first domino in a domino structure that, when pushed into the next domino, triggers all the other dominos to fall one by one. Similarly, the power of exercise is not only in its ability to help people lose weight and become more fit; its power is also in its ability to start **widespread, positive change in people's lives—even in areas that seem unrelated to physical fitness.**

The power of keystone habits explains why being an involved father is so powerful. **Father involvement is a keystone habit.** (Actually, a set of habits that form a keystone habit.)

That's why father involvement affects so many areas of fathers' lives and the lives of children, mothers, and families, and even the environment in communities. **When fathers are involved in the lives of their children, it triggers positive behavior in other aspects of fathers' lives**

⁷ Duhigg, C. (2012). *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. New York, NY: Random House.

(e.g. they engage in healthier behavior), children's lives (e.g. they are less likely to abuse alcohol and drugs), and mothers' lives (e.g. they are healthier during their pregnancies). It's also why it positively affects our society (e.g. lower levels of poverty and child abuse and more educational success for children). It's why more resources must be focused on addressing the crisis of father absence.

Ideas on Application

When it comes to working with fathers individually or in groups, you can use the power of keystone habits to help fathers identify the habits (behaviors) unique to them that: 1) trigger a lack of father involvement, and 2) will trigger greater father involvement. (You can also use keystone habits to look for clues that will improve father-mother relationships.) **It's likely that a single habit will contribute to a lack of father involvement or trigger more father involvement** (moreover, it's likely to be a group of habits.) Nevertheless, one or two of those habits might be more important than the others, thus revealing an area(s) of focus for immediate change.

To apply the power of keystone habits, use the following process, which you can customize to fit your setting (e.g. group, one-on-one case management, etc.):

Step 1: Develop a comprehensive list of frequent/regular activities/behaviors.

- Identify the “universe” of frequent/regular activities/behaviors that fathers currently engage in.
- Ask fathers to write or tell you (and you record) their activities/behaviors during a typical week. Consider using the structure of roles in which to group activities, such as father, husband/partner, worker/employee, friend, etc. You could start by asking fathers the roles they have, and then ask them to list the activities they engage in each week to perform those roles.
- After fathers develop their weekly activities, ask if they perform activities less frequently (e.g. monthly), but that they do consistently, to ensure you get a comprehensive list.

Step 2: Identify existing keystone habits that promote father absence.

- Look for keystone habits that encourage or lead to *father absence*. Focus on habits that are within his control.
- Ask of each father: What do you do with such frequency that it prevents you from being present? After you identify those habits, ask: How can you eliminate them? Work with fathers to develop tactics to eliminate these poor habits. It might not be easy, but it will be worth it.

Step 3: Identify existing and potential keystone habits that promote father involvement.

- Look for keystone habits that encourage or lead to father involvement. Again, focus on habits that are within his control.
- Ask of each father: What do you do that gets you involved and that you could do with more frequency? Add to that list habits for fathers to consider integrating into their lives. You can come with a list to discuss or start developing a list with fathers from scratch. Identify habits within fathers' control, they can do frequently (e.g. several times a week or once a week), and that provide “small wins.”

Step 4: Focus on small wins.

- After fathers develop their list of potential keystone habits that promote father involvement, narrow that list down by focusing on habits that fathers can do easily and frequently before tackling habits that are harder to accomplish and that, even if easy to accomplish, they can't do as frequently.
- Why is this focus so important? Because it creates small wins that fathers experience often/repeatedly. While they might seem minor in the broad scheme of things, they build a foundation of confidence, especially in fathers who haven't been successful at being involved.

Step 5: Reinforce/praise the small wins.

- When fathers achieve small wins, praise fathers. This praise will help keystone habits snowball into the other habits of involvement the habits will affect. In other words, praise helps tip the keystone habits—the first dominoes—into the other habits. Watch them fall one by one!

Depending on your situation and how much time you have to work with fathers, it might not be possible to focus on keystone habits that both encourage *and* discourage father involvement at the same time. At the very least, address keystone habits that encourage father involvement.

Application Tools

For users of NFI's [24/7 Dad® A.M and P.M](#) programs, the *My 24/7 Dad® Checklist* new to the 3rd Editions is an ideal tool for fathers to use to apply keystone habits. In fact, these should be the most important checklist items. Having a checklist provides fathers with clear direction around what they should do on a regular basis to be involved. They can modify and add to their items (habits) as they become more involved, and want to tackle more challenging (but important) habits of an involved, responsible, committed father.

Regardless of how you apply keystone habits, 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 keystone habits to improve retention and fathers' involvement in the lives of their children, review the following resources:

- The book [The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business](#) by Charles Duhigg.
- The [7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#) by Stephen Covey. The habits in this book are ideal for fathers to integrate as they become more involved. Indeed, NFI develop a workshop called [The 7 Habits of a 24/7 Dad™](#) that you should consider offering to the fathers you serve. Visit www.fathersource.org to learn more.

Idea 6: Cognitive Biases

This sixth chapter provides ideas on how you might integrate research on **cognitive biases**. 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).

In the third chapter of this guide (Framing and the “No Choice Option”), we introduced you to the work of Daniel Kahneman in which he captures the research on the cognitive biases humans suffer from in making decisions, regardless of the decisions they make. He describes how we rely on two cognitive systems when making decisions. **System 1** “operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control.” We often call it our “gut instinct.” **System 2** “allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations” and involves deliberate choice. We often call it our “rational side.”

We primarily rely on System 1 to make most of our decisions. Unfortunately, it often leads us astray and gets us into trouble. The reason it leads us astray is that it relies on rules of thumb that give us a starting point from which to base our decisions. The problem is these rules of thumb can bias our thinking in ways that lead to poor decisions in many instances because we don’t spend adequate time and energy thinking through those decisions.

This installment focuses on how you can use the knowledge of cognitive biases to improve your work with fathers. While the number of biases is large, this installment focuses on several of the most common ones you might encounter in your work with fathers.

Confirmation Bias

The **confirmation bias** refers to people’s tendency to seek evidence that supports their current views. People naturally want reassurance that their views are correct. They don’t typically challenge their own views by seeking evidence to disprove them. It’s threatening to people’s sense of whom they are to admit when they’re wrong. That threat makes the confirmation bias one of the most potent cognitive biases in work with fathers because most fathers don’t actively look for evidence that their views might be wrong. If they rely primarily on punishing their children rather than disciplining them, for example, they won’t look for evidence that they should use punishment as a last resort, not a first option.

When fathers suffer from the confirmation bias, it can be difficult to introduce new concepts about how to be a good father. Using the punishment versus discipline example once again, fathers can find it difficult to swallow the notion that guiding and teaching their children with effective discipline techniques is more effective, and better for their children’s overall well-being, than taking away cherished privileges or using corporal punishment.

⁸ Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Availability Bias

The **availability bias** refers to people's tendency to recall information that is most readily available. It causes people to overestimate the probability that events will occur. Child abductions and plane crashes, for example, tend to generate lots of coverage in the mass media. As a result, people commonly overestimate the frequency of child abductions and plane crashes.

When fathers suffer from the availability bias, it can be difficult to know the accuracy of the information they provide. That difficulty is not caused by a conscious decision on the part of fathers (e.g. they lie) but because they don't know they might be misled by their most recent experiences. If you ask a father how happy he is in his relationship with the mother of his children, for example, his answer will most likely hinge on the nature of the most recent experiences with her—perhaps even the most recent one—not on the breadth of the experiences with her over the course of the relationship. If the most recent experience was a poor one, he will be more likely to say he is unhappy, and vice versa, than he is.

Hindsight Bias

You've undoubtedly heard the phrase "hindsight is 20/20," which refers to our ability to more clearly evaluate a choice after it happens, and know the outcome of that choice, than before we made the choice. The problem with that phrase is it's misleading. It assumes that we should have known, or did know all along, what would happen even though we could not possibly or accurately predict the outcome.

This **hindsight bias** refers to people's tendency to create narratives (stories) about past events so they can make sense of unpredictable outcomes. Regardless of how sound decisions made or processes put in place were at the time of the choice, this tendency causes people to more readily blame good decisions and processes related to poor outcomes than give credit to good decisions and processes related to good outcomes, a bias all its own called the **outcome bias**. In other words, people have difficulty understanding that good decisions and processes can result in unpredictable, poor outcomes just as easily as they can lead to unpredictable, good outcomes.

When fathers suffer from the hindsight bias, it can be difficult to help them understand that they are not necessarily to blame (or to blame as much) for specific outcomes. When a father assesses a failed relationship with the mother of his children, for example, he might disproportionately attribute the failure to himself or to her. Perhaps he made mostly good decisions as they tried to work through their issues, but factors beyond his control had a major contribution to the failed relationship. The father may think he knew all along that the relationship was headed to a poor conclusion when he didn't know and couldn't have known the outcome.

On the other hand, when fathers suffer from this bias they take more credit than they deserve for good outcomes. A father might take more credit for raising a healthy, well-adjusted child, for example, than he gives to the mother. He may say that his firm discipline was the key factor in how his child turned out when many other factors contributed just as much or more.

Ideas on Application

When it comes to working with fathers individually or in groups, you can use knowledge of cognitive biases to more effectively work with them. Here are a few general examples from which you can develop specific approaches or tactics that best fit the context in and fathers with whom you work:

- **Confirmation Bias:** Knowing that many fathers will seek evidence to confirm their existing beliefs, attitudes, and behavior—and that they will resist changing the way they think and behave—better prepares you to work with fathers, especially on challenging topics such as masculinity, child discipline, and healthy relationships (e.g. communication with their spouse or partner). When you help fathers tackle these challenging topics, take extra care to prepare yourself for what can be a long process of change around certain issues.
- **Availability Bias:** Knowing that many fathers will rely on recent events and experiences to shape the information they provide can help you broaden your thinking and approach to dig more deeply into what contributes to fathers' thoughts and feelings. Ask probing questions to determine what fathers use as the foundation (evidence) for the information they provide. If a father says he is unhappy in his relationship with the mother of his children, for example, you can ask questions to determine whether he is narrowly framing his feeling based on a recent experience(s) with her or the breadth of the relationship. If the former, you can challenge him to re-evaluate his feeling based on the breadth of the relationship.
- **Hindsight Bias:** Knowing that many fathers will create stories about past events to explain unpredictable outcomes, you could ask them, for example, to create timelines that include the decisions they made and processes they put in place and examine with them how much those decisions and processes contributed to good and bad outcomes. Help them evaluate the quality of the decisions and processes separate from the outcomes. In some cases, they might learn they should not abandon a good tactic to become a better father or partner, for example, just because it didn't lead to the desired outcome. Help them understand that the good tactic becomes the means and the end—even though the father hopes it will lead to a good outcome—and that it might contribute to a good outcome the next time.

Regardless of how you apply the knowledge of cognitive biases, 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 cognitive biases to improve your work with fathers, consider the following resources:

- The book [*Thinking, Fast and Slow*](#) by Daniel Kahneman.
- The book [*Decisive: How to Make Better Choices in Life and Work*](#) by Chip Heath and Dan Heath
- The book [*Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*](#) by Robert Cialdini
- The book [*Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces that Shape our Decisions*](#) by Dan Ariely

Idea 7: Planning Prompts

This seventh chapter 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).

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.⁹ 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).¹⁰

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. 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.¹¹ The public aspect of these commitments is when patients and customers make them in front of staff.

⁹ <http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/small-steps-that-make-a-big-impact-on-achieving-goals/>

¹⁰ Martin, S.J., Goldstein, N.H., & Cialdini, R. B. (2015). *The Small Big: Small Changes that Spark Big Influence*. London: Profile Books LTD.

¹¹ Martin, S.J., Goldstein, N.H., & Cialdini, R. B. (2015). *The Small Big: Small Changes that Spark Big Influence*. London: Profile Books LTD.

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:

- Direct dads to 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. (NFI has made such cards available for use with its programs to help facilitators increase retention of participants.)
- If you run group interactions, direct dads to 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 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 guide 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 BIG: 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

Idea 8: The Switch Framework

This eighth and final chapter provides ideas on how you might integrate the research-based **Switch Framework**. Integrating this framework could make you more effective in your work with fathers (e.g. facilitating a fatherhood program or working with fathers one-on-one).

Change is hard. It's hard enough to change your own behavior, let alone the behavior of fathers who aren't as involved in the lives of their children as they should be.

The challenge inherent in encouraging and initiating behavior change among fathers—and eventually helping fathers maintain behavior change—is why the Switch Framework is such a powerful tool in NFI's programs. **Indeed, it is the framework upon which we've built our evidence-based [24/7 Dad®](#) and [InsideOut Dad®](#) programs.**

This practical, research-based, powerful framework is described in the book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*¹². The framework will help you understand how to help fathers change their behavior by acknowledging that they have an emotional side (the “Elephant”) and a rational side (the “Rider”). It will help you reach and appeal to both sides and show fathers how to become the best fathers they can be given their unique circumstances. You can use it in your work with fathers regardless of how you work with fathers (e.g. in a group-based or one-on-one environment) and the level of depth at which you work with them.

The reason NFI chose this framework for our programs is because becoming an involved, responsible, committed father is extremely difficult for some fathers, especially fathers who are non-custodial and non-residential and who face other challenges to being involved (e.g. unemployment, owe child support, and have a poor relationship with the mother of their children). Our programs do the three things below to help these and all fathers successfully change. Think about how you can implement them in your own work.

- **Direct the Rider:** Provide clear direction to fathers' rational side on how to become an involved, responsible, committed father. Fathers can sometimes appear to be resistant to change when, in fact, they lack clear direction. They simply don't know how to be a good father. (Fathers who go through NFI's programs often remark that they didn't know they weren't good fathers until they received this direction.) Show fathers what works and that they can apply what works. Focus on specific behaviors fathers must engage in—a script rather than vague ideas on how to become a better father. Point to fathers' destination—to become an involved, responsible, committed father—and why it's worth it to get there.
- **Motivate the Elephant:** Engage fathers' emotional side by motivating them to become an involved, responsible, committed father. Fathers can sometimes appear to lack motivation when, in fact, they've become exhausted in their attempts to be a good father. Motivate fathers by helping them feel the importance of being a good father and making change manageable (i.e. small enough to see change is possible). Help fathers develop a sense of identity as a father. Help them see that change is possible, generally, and growth as a father is possible, specifically.

¹² Heath, C., and Heath, D. (2010). *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*. New York: Broadway Books.

- **Shape the Path:** Help fathers become involved, responsible, and committed with a focus on developing habitual behaviors. Help fathers learn the importance of **consistent** involvement that includes actions they can take again and again until they become habits. Habitual behaviors become ingrained—a part of who fathers are. Consequently, they don't tax the Rider or exhaust the Elephant.

How to Apply

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

- **To Direct the Rider...**
 - » **Provide examples of how to change:** Look for examples (models) of fathers who have changed their behavior to become involved, responsible, committed. Then share those examples with the fathers whose behavior needs to change. Plenty of fathers have learned how to change when change was hard. Use these “bright spots” as shining examples. If possible, have these fathers share their stories of change.
 - » **Tell fathers *exactly* how to change:** Don't leave anything to chance. Provide dads with a script on what to change and how to change it. Focus on the actions and habits that will have the most impact (i.e. individual actions and habits that create massive change).
 - » **Emphasize the goal:** Keep the goal of becoming an involved, responsible, committed father in the forefront of the mind of each father. Help each father develop an objective or two that will help him to reach this goal and continually hammer them home. Consider creating a laminated wallet-size card with the objectives on it that a father can keep on hand or put on his refrigerator, bathroom mirror, or anywhere else he might often see it. Consider having fathers identify an inspiring image (picture) that encapsulates what reaching this goal will look like or symbolize that they can also keep on hand or post. The image should inspire.
- **To Motivate the Elephant...**
 - » **Help fathers find the feeling:** Help each father find the positive (not negative) feeling that will motivate him to change. Until fathers connect emotionally with the need to change, the understanding of the need to change (the intellectual aspect of it) won't be enough. Fathers often **know** they need to change before they **feel** the need to change.
 - » **Make change manageable:** Break change down into manageable parts (shrink it). Make it doable with individual actions fathers can complete given their unique circumstances. Don't ask fathers to do something that is unrealistic (e.g. a father visits his child monthly when his child lives several states away). Choose actions that will help fathers quickly acquire “small wins.”
 - » **Build a “father identity”:** Fathers need to identify as fathers. That fact might seem painfully obvious, but until a man identifies as a father and considers that role to be of the utmost importance, it will be very hard for him to engage in the actions required to change. Help fathers grow into that identity—adopt that identity—so that they eventually **embrace** their fatherhood role.

- » **Instill a growth mindset:** Fathers must believe they can change. Known as “self-efficacy,” a father must believe he can engage in the actions of an involved, responsible, committed father. Instill in fathers the belief that they can grow and will continue to grow as a father when they embrace that role.
- **To Shape the Path...**
 - » **Help fathers change their environment:** A father’s environment can create a lot of inertia that makes change incredibly hard. Especially in Western cultures, we like to think we’re the masters of our own destiny. While that’s true to an extent, research shows our environment has a lot to say about why we make the choices we make and behave in the way we do. Fathers need an environment conducive to change and maintaining change. Help them identify the aspects of their environment that keep them stuck and what they need to change about it (i.e. get rid of or introduce) to take the actions required of an involved, responsible, committed father. Start with small changes. Even one small change can make a big difference.
 - » **Identify and build habits:** Becoming a great father centers on developing the habits of one. Help fathers build frequently repeatable actions that engage them with their children in a way that considers their unique situation. For more on developing these habits, read the fifth chapter in this guide: *Keystone Habits!*
 - » **Connect fathers to other committed fathers:** The authors of *Switch* refer to this action as “rally the herd.” Fathers want to know that change is possible—that other fathers want to change, are changing, and have changed. The best way to rally the herd is to surround fathers with other fathers who are in various stages of change, but who are all committed to change regardless of how difficult it might be for them. Fathers who work together to change are what make group-based programs so powerful. Change becomes contagious in these programs. (Two fathers who work together while not technically a herd is better than a father who works alone.)

Regardless of how you apply the knowledge of the Switch Framework, 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 the Switch Framework to improve your work with fathers, consider the following resources:

- The book [*Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*](#) by Chip Heath and Dan Heath.
- The website of the Heath brothers: www.heathbrothers.com. It contains several resources to help you get the most out of the Switch Framework.