

7-1-2022

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Recommended Citation

Turner, Joshua J.; Higginbotham, Brian J.; and Bradford, Kay (2022) "Fatherhood Education During the Pandemic," *Outcomes and Impact Quarterly*. Vol. 2: Iss. 2, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26077/2f8e-bb04>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/oiq/vol2/iss2/5>

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Fatherhood Education During the Pandemic

Joshua J. Turner, Brian Higginbotham, and Kay Bradford

Abstract

This article highlights the transition of Healthy Relationships Utah from in-person to virtual fatherhood education workshops during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, evaluation results showed no differences in program outcomes between in-person and virtual formats. Qualitative data from virtual participants illustrates the benefits and challenges of virtual program delivery.

Introduction

Utah State University (USU) Extension faculty administer the *Healthy Relationships Utah (HRU)* initiative, which includes relationship education programs for fathers. In March 2020, restrictions stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic required the transition from in-person to virtual workshops for all fatherhood education programs and for other *HRU* services statewide (Higginbotham et al., 2021). In recent years, scholars have explored the feasibility and impact of online intervention (Doss et al., 2019; Duncan et al., 2009) as a tool to disseminate relationship education. Overall, findings on online interventions have been mostly positive (Roddy et al., 2018). To explore the impact of the transition of fatherhood education to online delivery, we examined differences in outcomes among fathers in communities across the state, using both quantitative and qualitative methods. This article also highlights the steps taken to respond to the pandemic, as it relates to the transitions made to facilitate *HRU's 24/7 Dad* program.

Response

Fatherhood education is effective in increasing father involvement, improving coparenting, and increasing job skills (Holmes et al., 2020). With past research focusing more on the experiences of middle-class, European Americans (Skogrand et al. 2009), an emphasis has been placed on increasing participation among fathers from historically underrepresented groups (Avellar et al., 2018). Some scholars suggest that virtual formats may help reach underrepresented groups with more ease and less expense to the participant and program itself (Townley & Yalowich, 2015). The transition to virtual workshops allowed the project team to examine the possible differences in outcomes between in-person and virtual formats, while also learning more about potential differences in processes between these formats by qualitatively examining the experiences of virtual participants who completed a fatherhood education program.

The implementation of *HRU's* virtual fatherhood education workshops began in April 2020. Participants were taught the *24/7 Dad* program in four, two-hour sessions by trained facilitators, which is consistent with program procedures for in-person sessions. The primary change to the program delivery was that participants met in virtual classrooms through Zoom. A pretest-posttest design evaluated whether participants increased their knowledge of father-child closeness and job skill development, comparing delivery formats (in-person vs. virtual). Qualitative data provided insight on the experiences of virtual participants, by asking them what they liked most and liked least about the virtual workshop.

Target Audience

A total of 217 fathers participated between July 2019 and June 2020. Forty-one percent were between the ages of 25 and 34, 72% were Caucasian, 22% were Latino, 40% held high school diplomas, 38% were married, 65% were employed, and 24% reported monthly incomes below \$500. A majority (62%) participated in-person prior to the transition to online program delivery. Bivariate analyses showed that virtual participants reported higher education and income than in-person participants. For instance, 18% of in-person participants had less than a high school diploma versus 5% of virtual participants. Further, one-third of virtual participants reported monthly incomes of \$4,000 or more versus 12% of in-person participants.

Outcomes and Impact

With respect to outcomes related to knowledge change, paired-samples *t*-tests revealed statistically significant increases in knowledge from pretest to posttest for father-child closeness ($p < .05$) and job skill development ($p < .05$). Increases were greatest for father-child closeness ($MD = 0.11$; $SD = 0.35$; $d = 0.23$). Increases for job skill development were comparable ($MD = 0.09$; $SD = 0.44$; $d = 0.18$). For differences in knowledge gain between in-person and virtual participants, independent samples *t*-tests revealed no statistically significant differences between in-person and virtual format participants from pretest to posttest. Therefore, in-person and virtual participants experienced similar levels of knowledge improvements from the program.

Qualitative data were used to describe virtual participants' experiences. Participants specifically mentioned liking the virtual format, noting the convenience of distance learning and features of virtual formats like breakout sessions. However, most participants reserved their comments for the quality of the virtual workshop and facilitator effectiveness. For example, one participant noted, "I really enjoyed feeling more capable and prepared to be a father from what I learned in the class." Another participant stated, "The teachers had really excellent ways of communicating the concepts to real world situations and made it fun and enjoyable to attend."

Some participants described their experience as less positive because of the virtual format. For example, the lack of intimacy in virtual workshops was described, "I'll be honest, the digital Zoom course was a little difficult and limited interaction." Others noted technical difficulties, "It was online so the sound quality was not always the best." Despite disliking the format, participants were also understanding of the circumstances under which workshops were being held, "Doing this remotely rather than in person, although this isn't necessarily a reflection on the course itself. This is just the way it is, given the circumstances."

Public Value and Next steps

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated that Extension make adjustments to normal operations (Jewkes et al., 2020) including modifying educational program delivery (Arnold & Rennekamp, 2020). For *HRU*, adjustments centered on the transition from in-person to virtual classrooms. On average, virtual formats attracted fathers who were more educated and financially affluent when compared to fathers who completed the in-person format, suggesting that the transition to virtual

delivery may decrease program usage by underrepresented groups. Quantitative data showed no significant differences in program outcomes by format, and fathers in both in-person and virtual workshops reported benefits on targeted outcomes related to father-child closeness and job skill development. Qualitative responses underscore benefits as well as elements of convenience, but were mixed in terms of participant perceptions toward virtual programming, also illustrating the challenges associated with virtual delivery methods.

These findings provide support for the effectiveness of the *24/7 Dad* program, regardless of delivery method. They also illustrate the ability of Extension programs to adapt and meet community needs. The findings suggest adopting a dual-delivery approach to future fatherhood education programming inasmuch as some participants may prefer one format over the other. Providing fatherhood education in both virtual and in-person modalities could increase the accessibility of Extension programming for fathers across Utah who have different learning preferences or those who may face specific barriers to in-person participation.

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