



Institute for  
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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

## **Peer Parenting Groups for Noncustodial Fathers**

### **2022–2024 Child Support Policy Research Agreement: Task 15**

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## INTRODUCTION

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This report is the primary deliverable associated with Task 15 of the 2022–2024 Child Support Research Agreement (CSRA): “Peer Parenting Groups for Noncustodial Fathers.” This task supports the goal of developing and evaluating new ways of constructively engaging noncustodial fathers to help strengthen their nonfinancial and financial support of nonresident children.

Fathers’ engagement and financial support plays an important role in healthy child well-being and development, especially in low-income families (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Barker et al., 2017; Kim & Hill, 2015). However, many noncustodial fathers experience barriers to financially supporting and spending time with their children, including confusion about their fatherhood role, difficulty navigating the legal system, and conflict with the child’s other parent (Coakley et al., 2014). As a result, noncustodial fathers are less likely to be engaged in their children’s lives than resident fathers or fathers with shared custody. Further, fathers who are more involved with their children are more likely to be financially responsible for their children (Nepomnyaschy, 2007). As such, there has been an increased interest among child support policymakers and the research community in identifying effective strategies for engaging and supporting noncustodial fathers.

To that end, this project was a collaboration between IRP and UW–Madison Division of Extension that adapted their recently developed peer support program for fathers, called Focus on Fathers, to meet the specific needs of noncustodial fathers. The existing Focus on Fathers program provides 1) education around parenting and child development and 2) a shared space for fathers to learn from and support each other. The program in its original form has been well-received by fathers but was not specifically tailored to noncustodial fathers and their unique

needs and concerns. The adapted program was motivated by the findings of a recent statewide fatherhood needs assessment conducted through UW–Madison Division of Extension (Kerr et al., 2022). That assessment found that fathers without primary placement seek support and education on topics such as successful co-parenting and navigating the child support system, as well as the desire to learn from other fathers who owe child support and live apart from their children. These findings are closely aligned with findings from recent IRP studies (Paulsell et al., 2015) identifying a desire among noncustodial parents to learn more about child support, parenting, co-parenting, and access and visitation in a peer-supported environment.

For this project, we 1) adapted this program to meet the specific needs of noncustodial fathers, by including education on child support, custody, and co-parenting; 2) incorporated input and feedback from noncustodial fathers on the program adaptation and development; and 3) assessed feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary effectiveness on a pilot test of the adapted program. This report provides an overview of the team’s data collection efforts, summarizes key findings, and discusses potential implications for policy and practice. Through data on program registration, attendance, engagement, and father feedback, we explored the effectiveness of programmatic strategies for reaching and engaging noncustodial fathers and father preferences related to the format and structure of peer-based programming. Results from the evaluation provide insights into fathers’ needs and strategies for engaging fathers in supports to meet those needs; the potential for the program to improve father understanding of the child support system; and access and visitation resources available to them. The data gathered through this evaluation offers a unique opportunity to learn about the effectiveness of specific programmatic elements and implementation approaches for serving fathers. This knowledge also sheds insight into the feasibility of a broader rollout of this or related programs aimed at noncustodial fathers in the

future. In particular, the experience and knowledge gained from this project provides valuable lessons to inform our tentatively planned modification, expansion, and evaluation of the pilot program to reach a broader array of noncustodial fathers over the 2025–26 period.

## **BACKGROUND**

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### **Father Engagement and Father-Focused Programming**

Decades of research has established the critical role that fathers play in the development and well-being of their children (e.g., Cabrera et al., 2014; 2018). Greater father engagement is associated with children’s academic achievement, psychological well-being, and reduced delinquent behavior in children (Allen & Lo, 2012; Barker et al., 2017; Kim & Hill, 2015). Paternal financial support also supports healthy child well-being and development, especially in low-income families and families with non-residential fathers (Choi & Pyun, 2014). Studies have established links between child support payments and children’s physical, mental, and emotional health (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Nepomnyaschy et al., 2012). Father engagement and financial support are intertwined as well, with evidence of bidirectional associations between father-child contact and child support payments (Nepomnyaschy, 2007).

Despite research demonstrating the importance of father involvement and financial support on child development, fathers are underserved in family interventions and services (Kerr et al., 2022; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Although fathers are typically welcome at parent education classes, most programs are designed for mothers and contain little information specific to fatherhood, such as father role modeling, custody rights and responsibilities, and information about the importance of fathers’ involvement in children’s lives (Henry et al., 2020; Lechowicz et al., 2019; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Fathers report feeling out of place or uninvited at these mother-centric programs (e.g., Panter-Brick et al., 2014) and facilitators are sometimes unaware

of how to effectively involve them (McBride et al., 2017; Tully et al., 2018). Few evidence-based father-centric programs exist (Holmes et al., 2020) and fathers tend to lack awareness of the ones that do (Lee et al., 2011). Even when programs are available, fathers are less likely to attend due to fears of judgment or bias, doubts about the utility of such programs, and practical barriers such as transportation and scheduling (Lee et al., 2011; Panter-Brick et al., 2014).

These limitations in programming are exacerbated for noncustodial fathers who already face barriers to being involved with their children, yet they may serve to benefit from programming that supports them in their fathering role. Noncustodial fathers must navigate complex systems that can limit or even prevent them from engaging with their children, including child support and family court systems (Kerr et al., 2022; Vogel, 2020). Many fathers report feelings of hopelessness and distance from their parenting role, such as feeling reduced to a financial provider or child support payee (Kerr et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2011; Roy & Dyson, 2010; Threlfall & Kohl, 2015; Vogel et al., 2024). Noncustodial fathers also describe complicated relationships with their co-parent, which can create further barriers for involvement—especially when fathers’ time with their children is gatekept by their co-parent (Lee et al., 2016; Kerr et al., 2022). Additionally, noncustodial fathers often report struggling with mental health and addiction, as well as psychological challenges associated with lack of social support, adapting to their new role as a single parent, or separation from their children (Dudley, 1991; Kerr et al., 2022; Russell et al., 2024).

However, there is substantial evidence that fathers desire to be involved in their children’s lives and to access programs and services that improve their parenting skills (Martinson & Nightingale, 2008; Lee et al., 2016). Increasing fathers’ access to relevant programs and services is important as these programs have demonstrated positive effects on

fathers' well-being, father involvement, parenting behaviors, and coparenting relationships (Holmes et al., 2020). Further, there is evidence that increasing fathers' sense of hope and connection to their parenting role increases their intention to pay child support (Chan & Adler-Baeder, 2019) and higher quality coparenting relationships are associated with greater child support compliance and involvement with children (e.g., Dubey, 1995; Goldberg, 2015).

Together, this prior research suggests that the benefits of father-centric programming may have downstream impacts on child support payments and family well-being. Therefore, developing and evaluating programming tailored to fathers' specific needs and preferences that covers topics relevant for noncustodial fathers is a worthwhile endeavor.

### **Building a Father-Centric Program for Noncustodial Fathers**

Our goal with the current study was to develop and test a program to support noncustodial fathers that was tailored to their specific needs. To do so, we incorporated program and design elements that have been identified as key characteristics of high-quality fatherhood programs (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2012; Panter-Brick et al., 2014) and also emerged in our Wisconsin Fatherhood Statewide Needs Assessment (Kerr et al., 2022). These characteristics align with best practices for community-based scholarship (Strand et al., 2003) in that they emphasize collaboration with fathers during the development, implementation, and evaluation of programs. This collaboration with fathers also allows for tailoring the location, timing, content, and delivery format of the programs specifically to fathers' preferences, which is likely to increase father participation and engagement (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2018; Panter-Brick et al., 2014).

One approach we adopted for this program was a peer support model, which has been identified as a need by both fathers and father-serving practitioners (Allport et al., 2018; Lee et

al., 2016; Kerr et al., 2022; Paulsell et al. 2015; Noyes et al., 2018). The peer support model emphasizes fathers learning from each other, which aligns with how fathers typically access information about parenting (Lee et al., 2011). Peer groups also emphasize developing positive relationships between fathers, allowing fathers to develop support networks amongst one another that can continue beyond the group or program, which meets fathers' expressed needs for stronger social support networks (Kerr et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Roy & Dyson, 2010). While father-focused peer support groups in other contexts—including fathers caring for children with disabilities and fathers with children in Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICU)—have shown positive outcomes (Archibald, 2019; Batchelor et al., 2019), few programs like this exist for single or noncustodial fathers (Henry et al., 2020; Roy & Dyson, 2010).

We centered the initial proposed program sessions around topics identified by noncustodial fathers as important and relevant to their parenting experience in prior research as well as during the statewide Fatherhood Needs Assessment (Kerr et al., 2022) (see Figure 1). Both fathers and service providers have identified the need for more support around effective co-parenting (Jukes et al., 2024; Kerr et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2018), resources for working with family courts and child support systems (Kerr et al., 2022; Vogel, 2020), and parenting knowledge and skills (Jukes et al., 2024; Kerr et al., 2022; Lechowicz et al., 2019).

Finally, we incorporated fathers' perspectives into the development and evaluation of the program. Given the strong emphasis on tailoring programs to fathers' specific needs (Lechowicz et al., 2019; Panter-Brick et al., 2014), we engaged fathers in the development and evaluation of the program. We developed the initial program concepts and structure ideas largely based on prior research and the Wisconsin Fatherhood Needs Assessment (Kerr et al., 2022) and then invited fathers to provide ideas and feedback on the broad concepts to help us further develop the

program content, structure, and delivery methods. Despite the rich body of research on father-inclusive programming, this participatory evaluation approach (Cousins & Earl, 1992) aimed to ensure that the program was appropriate and specific to the population it was designed to serve—noncustodial fathers in Wisconsin.

**Figure 1: Proposed Father Peer Support Program Content and Structure Shared with Fathers in Phase 1**

**Focus on Fathers  
Peer Support Program**

**Four one-hour sessions**

- Held via Zoom
- One topic per session
- One session per week

**Session topics**

- Parenting
  - How to be involved with your child, even from a distance
- Co-Parenting
  - How to work with your co-parent, communication strategies, conflict resolution
- Child Support
  - How to work with child support systems and make arrangements that work best for you and your child
- Child Custody
  - How to work with custody systems, modifying custody arrangements, your rights and responsibilities as a father

## **THE CURRENT STUDY**

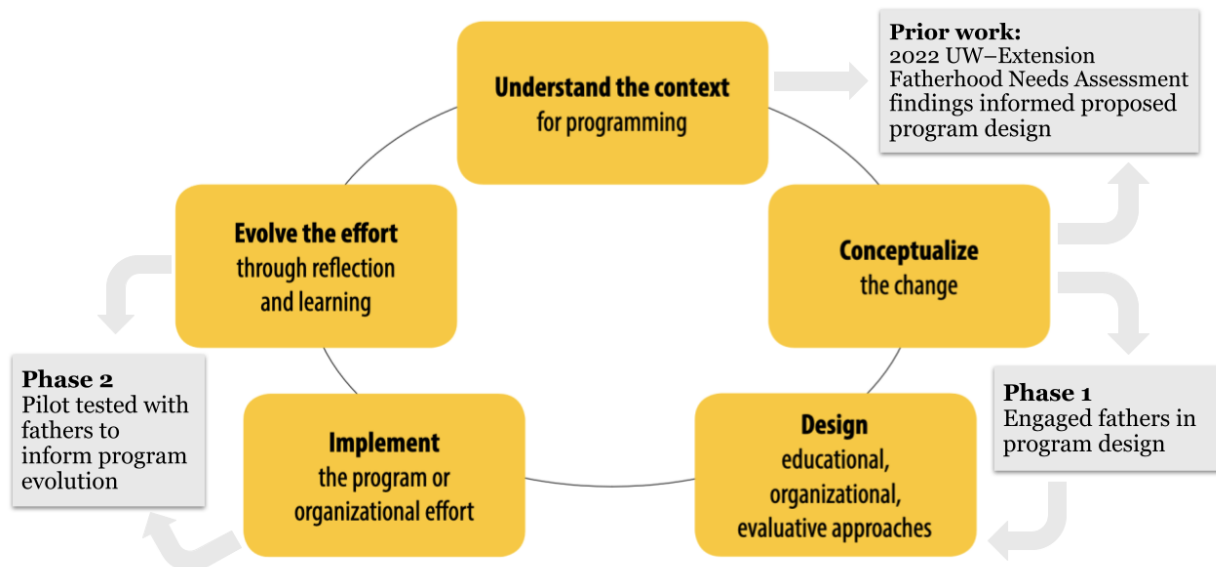
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The overarching goal of this study was to develop and pilot a peer support program targeted to the needs of fathers who live apart from their children most of the time. The development and evaluation of this program was informed by UW–Madison Extension’s Program Development Framework (UW–Madison Extension Evaluation Leadership Support Team, 2024) (see Figure 2). The study has two components: (1) Phase 1, which aimed to include fathers’ voices in the development of a peer support program to meet the needs of fathers whose children do not live with them full-time; and (2) Phase 2, which assessed the feasibility,



acceptability, and preliminary effectiveness of the fatherhood peer support program that was developed and refined through the feedback obtained in Phase 1. The data for Phase 1 came from two focus groups conducted with a total of eight fathers whose children do not live with them full-time. For Phase 2, data sources included surveys conducted pre- and post-course, post-session surveys, and a focus group held after the final program session. We also incorporated feedback obtained from the program facilitators through post-session surveys and open-ended comments collected during a project meeting.

**Figure 2: UW–Madison Extension’s Program Development Framework Applied to the Fatherhood Peer Support Program**



## Phase 1: Program Development

### Methods

The primary goal of Phase 1 of this project was to include fathers’ voices in the development of a peer support program to meet the needs of noncustodial fathers. To elicit

fathers' perspectives, we conducted focus groups with Wisconsin-based fathers who have one or more children under 18 years of age that do not live with them full-time. To allow for a wider range of perspectives on fathers' needs and experiences, having an existing child support order was not a requirement for participation in either phase of the project. In the Phase 1 focus groups, we asked fathers about challenges they face as a noncustodial parent, what resources they find helpful, what resources they wish were available, and what would make a program for non-custodial fathers useful to them (see Appendix 1). We also presented fathers with a potential program outline and asked them for feedback on program structure and content (e.g., topics, length, number of sessions). See Figure 1 for the handout with information on the proposed program that was shared with fathers during the focus group.

We conducted two focus groups with a total of eight father participants. Both focus groups were held virtually via Zoom and lasted approximately 90 minutes. The groups were facilitated by the lead researcher, with support from an Extension specialist and research assistant. Participants were able to join the Zoom meeting from any device (e.g., phone, computer, tablet), including calling in with their phone (audio only) if they did not have a capable device or the internet access necessary for a video call. However, all fathers participated via video on Zoom. A research assistant took notes during the focus groups, which were summarized and read aloud to fathers prior to the end of the meeting. Fathers were then asked whether the notes accurately captured their feedback and ideas and were given an opportunity to add anything that was not captured in the notes. The full focus group protocol can be found in Appendix 1. Fathers who participated were provided a \$25 Amazon gift card as compensation. We obtained ethics approval from the UW–Madison Minimal Risk Institutional Review Board (#2023-1556) for all Phase 1 and Phase 2 study activities.

## ***Recruitment***

Fathers were recruited through UW-Extension educators and community partners (e.g., Urban League of Madison, Racine County ELEVATE) who were asked to share recruitment information with local partners and fathers. We also recruited fathers directly through Extension program participation (e.g., Extension co-parenting classes, Focus on Fathers classes). Using email scripts and flyers (see Appendix 2), fathers who had at least one child who did not live with them full-time were invited to “take part in a virtual, recorded group discussion providing input and feedback on a potential program to support fathers.” Fathers who were interested either shared their information through a Google Form or reached out via email or through Extension educators or community partners. A total of 11 fathers expressed interest in participating in focus groups. A study team member contacted the interested fathers and confirmed their eligibility and availability for attending a focus group. We identified seven possible focus group times, offering a wide range of days and times, that were presented to all interested fathers. The seven options were narrowed down to two final focus group times, of which all but one of the interested fathers were available to attend at least one. Two fathers indicated availability for at least one of the focus group times, but did not attend for undisclosed reasons, resulting in a final sample size of eight fathers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Our initial goal was to conduct three focus groups with a total of 15 to 20 fathers; however, we experienced unforeseen challenges during the recruitment process that resulted in a smaller sample than intended. These included staffing challenges within the Extension translation team that resulted in our being unable to translate recruitment materials in a timely manner and difficulties obtaining legitimate responses to recruitment materials disseminated via social media. To avoid the risk of losing the 11 eligible and interested fathers we had already recruited, and to keep the project on schedule, we moved forward with Phase 1 without implementing the Spanish language group and with smaller English language groups than planned.

### *Sample*

A total of eight fathers participated in two focus groups (five in the first group, three in the second group) and ranged in age from 30 to 52 years old ( $M = 40.6$  years,  $SD = 7.1$ ); one father did not indicate their age. Seven out of the eight participants identified as White; one participant identified as “one or more races that are not listed above,” with none identifying as Latino/Hispanic (one indicated that they would prefer not to answer).

The eight fathers in the focus group reported having children ranging in age from four years old to adults. Three fathers reporting having one child, three fathers had two children, and the remaining two fathers had six children each. Across all eight fathers, their relationships included biological children, adopted children, and stepchildren. At least three fathers mentioned being married at least once in the past.

During the focus group, the fathers mentioned a variety of life circumstances and challenges regarding child support and placement. Five out of eight fathers explicitly mentioned paying child support. One father was not currently required to pay child support, but his former spouse was trying to initiate a child support order from another state. Other fathers had limited access to their children due to co-parents fighting motions for visitation or having only supervised visitation. Another father discussed at length his challenges regarding addiction and incarceration and the impacts they had on his access to his child.

### *Data Analysis*

In the analysis of the focus group data, we aimed to identify themes relating to fathers' needs for program content, their perception of the potential format of the program, and their ideas and suggestions for improving the proposed program. Focus group recordings were transcribed using an AI transcription service and quality-checked by research assistants. Two

UW-Extension evaluation interns conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) of the focus group data using MAXQDA software. In the first step of analysis, each intern individually reviewed and thematically coded separate focus groups. Next, the coders reviewed each other's analyses and met to discuss overlaps, discrepancies, and remaining questions or clarifications before combining their analysis into a unified report. The interns then shared their findings with the larger research team, including the lead researcher. As a final step, the lead researcher reviewed and refined the thematic analysis based on their own review of the transcript, the notes taken during the focus group sessions, and their own experience facilitating the focus group. This triangulation of data allowed us to identify any topics or feedback that emerged as more salient during the focus groups, even if not frequent enough to emerge as its own theme during formal analysis.

## **Results**

The results for Phase 1 include the themes that emerged from the analysis of the focus group transcripts, including information on what resources fathers have found to be helpful in navigating child support and custody, what major needs they still have, and their feedback on the potential program outline. The themes that emerged from the focus group fell into five overarching categories that aligned with the questions we asked in the focus groups (see Appendix 1 for focus group questions): 1) coparenting challenges; 2) mental health challenges; 3) challenges navigating the legal system; 4) strategies and solutions; and 5) feedback on the proposed program. The themes that emerged under each of these categories are described below.

### *Coparenting Challenges*

Two themes emerged in this category, which centered on the challenges fathers experience related to their coparent: *barriers to child communication and visitation* and *differences and disagreements between coparents*.

#### *Barriers to Child Communication and Visitation*

Several fathers described challenges with their coparents that interfered with their ability to communicate with and see their children. One father remarked, “I feel like I’m squeezed out of my daughter’s life by people by, you know, lots of different people.” This father seemed to be primarily referring to not being able to contact his daughter directly because of an existing restraining order from his previous partner. He explained, “I still can’t talk to my daughter at her [mom’s] house; I have to wait for her to grow up and want to call me... I have to have a go between, you know, that goes all the way down there and gets my daughter. And that is just, it’s just very stressful.”

In another situation, a father who is divorced said that there was no set placement schedule in their Marital Settlement Agreement, which recently became a problem after many years of it working well. When he told the mother that he would need to get a court-ordered schedule, things escalated, and she pursued criminal charges against him. In this case, the father reported that there is a bond motion to let him see the child that the mother is fighting and that they now have a guardian ad litem.

In a third case, a father with a history of incarceration and alcohol use disorder recently relapsed and is working with a case manager to provide regular updates to the child’s guardian to try to regain access to his child. He described the situation and what he was being told: “‘Your daughter’s upset, like you’re gonna need some sober time before you can talk to her again.’ So,

I'm like, well, what can I do? Like, how can I prove that I'm sober, that I'm doing the right thing?" The father described feeling frustrated and unsure what to do next given that no specific time frame for seeing his child has been identified or shared with him.

Together, the barriers and challenges that fathers described highlight the complexities of coparenting and visitation situations, and the difficulties that fathers experience trying to cope with and better their situations.

### *Differences and Disagreements Between Coparents*

Fathers also described needing support with how to navigate challenges related to disagreements with their coparent. For example, one father discussed frustration with his child's mother and her partner saying negative things about him to his daughter and being at a loss of how to move forward. He explained:

I just saw my daughter's therapist for the first time... my ex is taking her and her boyfriend to my daughter's therapy now, so I'm hearing things. My daughter was, you know, telling me that they say that they don't like me, you know, and I'm always very positive. And I try not to say anything negative.

Another father discussed cultural differences between co-parents, such as how he was raised to brush off injuries while his former partner handles them differently. He shared:

We're neglecting to realize how those cultural barriers, you know, hinder our ability to effectively co parent and understand each other, you know, [...] And it's like, I can't tell her she's wrong for the way she's respond[s], because that's who her community and her life is created to be. So I think that's the second thing I would look for is something to understand those cultural differences, and how to not blame each other for them, but navigate to figure out an effective plan for both of you. So neither one of you have to sacrifice your culture or your belief.

### *Mental Health Challenges*

Fathers identified mental health challenges they experienced related to managing both their personal situations and fatherhood simultaneously. Two themes emerged here: *mental health consequences* and *seeking support and coping*.

### *Mental Health Consequences*

Throughout both focus groups, fathers detailed the psychological challenges that resulted from navigating the barriers and consequences of being separated from their children. One father described the suicidal ideations he experienced while trying to get more access to his children as a greater mental health struggle than anything he had experienced before—even after being incarcerated for five years. He discussed not being able to share how he is really feeling with anyone:

I've questioned more suicide after my children and dealing with this battle than I ever have, and I went to prison at [age] ... You feel me, I've done a lot of bad things. And I've never regretted nor felt so defeated in my life. And I think that that's the problem is, there aren't places that we can reach out and say, "hey, I feel like this" without being committed, or, the next thing they say is, "what do you want to kill yourself?" And it's like, no, I don't want to kill myself, but I shouldn't have to feel like this. Because I want to be a father, you know. And so I definitely think that, you know, there should be like you said, definitely a place, a safe space, where we start to realize that even men, I like to call it... my theory is, we have to fight for our rights to be maternal men. Okay, we got to fight for our right to just cry about the simple things.

Another father described the lack of control and uncertainty that he feels as he tries to see his daughter after the mother moved over 100 miles away, against the court order, and is trying to figure out how to support his daughter who is distraught over negative things that people tell her about her father. He said:

I'm just stuck with it. I'm a little lost. We were doing so good. My daughter, you know, we'd have such a good time. I never have to yell at her. But lately, she's been very emotional, which is just very different than it's been. I don't know what's gonna happen in the future. I don't know where it's going. So I feel like I'm not in control of what's going on.

This same father also described how despite trying to do all the right things, his situation remains really difficult:

It's just really wild, I guess, is what I'm trying to say, trying to be sober, be positive, be the right role model, have all the right connection with your kid. It's



just hard to make all the right moves, like being in contact with child support, heaven forbid, you're on probation, or have other court obligations. We all know how it's real hard. It's tricky, and we're all here and we're all doing our best but it's complicated.

### *Seeking Support and Coping*

Fathers also discussed ways that they coped with and sought support (or not) from other people or services related to these challenges. One father talked about how helpful it was to have other people to talk to:

Men need other men to really edify them and support them and, be there for them. I mean, I got two, three guys that right now that call me every day, they're hard problems, you know, and I'm in a hard problem.

Another father discussed the emotional build-up that he experiences and how relying on others for that social support can have negative impacts:

One thing that we tend to neglect or fail to realize is how emotionally taxing this is on our long-term friendships, on the positive support people that we have, like, my wife... It's going to be so taxing, and it's going to be so stressful that whenever we become upset, and we don't have a great understanding of our emotion, we end up displaying those emotions on the ones we love and the ones that are closest to us every day, right? Because we can't yell at the ones we're angry at.

Not all fathers described having people close to them that they could lean on, however. One father shared how friends now avoid him because "you're in the middle of a battle that they don't want something rubbing off on them or something. So it's like, your friends kind of dry up." In addition, some fathers discussed experiences where seeking professional help for their mental health was used against them in the family court when trying to get access to their children. One father said:

This is from my own personal experience, under the stress I was under in [year]. I checked into [...] a psychiatric hospital for a few days. Worst thing I could have done. It's like, you can't even go for help. If you're stressed out of your mind. It's the most stressful part of your psychological thing. You go to try to get help. It's used against you. It's just boom, boom, boom, it's, it's used against you in the

sense that [...] now you got to have supervised visitation. You got to have that even if you're seeing your doctor.

Related to these challenges, fathers also described the coping mechanisms that they rely on to deal with their stress. One father shared:

I guess probably one of the biggest things for me was finding productive things to do when I didn't have my son. I created a list of things I wanted to get done around the house, and old friends I wanted to reconnect with, and just a lot of the things that we tend to put off in life because we get too busy. And now I find myself with all this extra time and an empty house minus my dog, which has been great to have. Just to, you know, keep pushing forward and stay positive. And, fill my open time with positive things and positive people, just kind of what I've been focusing on.

### ***Challenges Navigating the Legal System***

A subset of the focus group questions centered on fathers' experiences with child support and custody systems. In these discussions, three themes emerged: *logistical challenges*, *bias and double standards*, and *financial challenges*.

#### ***Logistical Challenges***

Several fathers described logistical challenges working with the system itself, such as problems with documentation, lack of or hard-to-access information, and inefficiency of county agencies and court systems. One father talked about moving around during the time of his divorce and having difficulty communicating with the child support office regarding these changes:

Basically had to do a lot of scavenging on online state websites to make sure that I had the right point of contacts to let them know, I'm still here at this time, I'm moving here at this time. And then when I moved, I had to produce, you know, the loan because I bought a house, and then I had to prove that I lived there for X amount of months.

He went on to say:

Keeping in contact with the county child support agency was a bit of a headache, because a lot of times there was nobody in the office, and I would have to leave them voice messages, but nobody would get back to me. That was one of the things and I understand being a state worker, sometimes...they're understaffed, they don't have enough people, they don't have all the information. But it's just when we're attempting to get that information to them in a timely manner that they dictate. And maybe it went over the timeline that they dictated, but I can say, well, I have the proof on my phone that I called you at this time.

Another father described delays working with child support during COVID-19 and associated consequences:

But when the last time I fought the motion to enforce, she asked for child support, but because it was the midst of COVID... it was nine months before we heard that hearing. And so [they say] I owe them from the time that she requested. So I started child support out almost \$70,000 in arrear.

Yet another father shared his challenges, this time specifically around getting the documentation he needed to pay his child support:

Well, recently, I tried to reach out again to get my number, to do it online. I had ordered, like my identification number or something. It was something that I can't remember the word for, but it's what I need to pay online. And I've been waiting for it to come in the mail. And it never did. So I have to reach back out again. I'm not sure what happened with the mail. But that's a little stressful.

He expanded on this by describing his experience calling the child support office for this issue:

The first time I called, it was pretty crazy. Because if your name starts with this, or if your last name starts with like, W through, you know, E or whatever, you have to press a lot of buttons to like, get a hold of somebody. It was pretty nuts. But when I finally did, the guy was really helpful.

### *Bias and Double Standards*

Some fathers described frustrations around feeling there was bias and double standards in the legal and court systems. As an example of this, when asked to talk about something that was challenging when working with the child support or family court system, one father said,

I've learned in [...] family court, we as men, we have to maintain a certain level of excellence. You know, I feel that while it's not said or, you know, flat out [...] we

don't really get the chance to make mistakes like this, you know, with our children.

After describing a situation he felt was unfair, another father remarked, "would that same thing have happened if the baby's mother did it? No way. No, no way." Fathers also described increased challenges getting access to their children while dealing with addiction or other physical or mental health problems. One father shared:

But like I said, there's no real resources between like, they're keeping the child from you, for whatever reason, whether it's fair or not, you know, you just gotta grin and bear it and file motions and things of that nature, reviews of conduct and things like that. So it's very difficult. It's quite difficult, especially when you struggle with like drug addiction, or alcoholism or mental health disorders and things.

### *Financial Challenges*

Several fathers discussed major financial challenges in navigating child support and custody systems that included difficulty paying child support, ability to afford an attorney, and the risks of trying to get access to their children when they were already in debt. For example, one father said: "Because if somebody doesn't have the ability to afford [an] attorney or you got an ex that's, you know, has money or resources to get a really good attorney. Then just you're screwed. [...] and that should not be that way." Other challenges that fathers described included the need for relief from child support when they could not work, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, and challenges with the child support and custody systems being intertwined. One father explained his experience:

I filed the motion and I've submitted an overwhelming amount of evidence that she has not produced to children as court ordered. And they say, 'Okay, you won, but actually you don't win because you're in contempt, because you owe this child support.' And so that's the thing that I'm going through right now.

### *Strategies and Solutions*

In addition to describing their challenges and struggles, fathers were also quick to offer ideas and strategies for improving child support and custody systems or for easing the burden in working with these systems. The themes that fell under this category included: *aspirations for systems change, tips and strategies, and helpful supports and services.*

In one theme, fathers discussed *aspirations for systems change* that primarily involved access to additional supports and resources. Fathers described how beneficial it would be to have a neutral third-party, such as a case manager, that could offer support without the risk of facing consequences (such as those described above) or a resource navigation system that could address specific questions and provide accessible and affordable support to fathers working with child support or custody. Some fathers also mentioned the desire to work together as fathers to push for legislation or systems change that benefits single or noncustodial fathers. For example, one father said:

I think that's really how we win. I think more than the legal aid, I think that it's bringing everyone together to organize to push legislation throughout the state of Wisconsin. Because, like I said, [...] when you get the legal services, it's just inevitable lawyers cost a lot of money, right. So when you're asking for funding, it's hard to decide and triage those cases, and offer that service on a widespread basis. So I think we focus energy more on what legislation says, and how these family or government funded programs are talking or in the verbiage that has been used when they're speaking about fathers and family, I think we'll get a lot farther, because we will see those end results, you know, today we got such and such to produce a bill or produce this that is going to help fathers in the long run. And I think that's how you keep getting brothers showing up and wanting to help because the biggest thing we're all looking for is to stop feeling hopeless in a situation I think we can all agree there is, no matter where we come from, or how we ended up here. We all have gotten to the point where we feel there is no more or nothing else we can do. And that's not okay. You know?

Along with these aspirations, fathers provided *tips and strategies* that have worked well for them in working with court systems, which focused primarily on being persistent, keeping the

child support office updated on personal changes, and keeping records and documentation of their contact with the court systems or personal actions related to one's case. One father explained how it has been helpful to keep child support informed of changes going on in his life:

So with my alcoholism, I lost jobs. You know, I went to jail a few times. But I always got a hold of child support and let them know what was going on, and just kept them updated. And they really appreciated it.

Other *helpful support and services* that fathers had utilized or suggested included counseling, parental advisors, avenues for individualized support, and opportunities to talk to other men and fathers. More specifically, fathers suggested opportunities to build camaraderie, such as through localized or regional support groups or action-based organizations where they can build relationships and support each other. In line with this, the facilitators observed fathers actively engaging in peer support with each other, such as offering advice and tips, during the focus group itself. One father summarized this well:

That's the camaraderie right there that I think is so powerful about what you guys [are] doing in this focus group, as you know, is sometimes it's easy to lose sight that there are other people going through exactly what you're going to have been to where you've been, or are at. And when we unite like this man, the things we overcome, it's just so inspiring.

### ***Feedback on Proposed Program***

A third element of the focus group was eliciting feedback from the fathers on the proposed content and structure of the newly developed peer support program (see Appendix 1 for specific questions). Fathers offered suggestions on the session topics, program structure (e.g., length, number of sessions, frequency), delivery methods, and motivation or incentives for participation.

When discussing the program itself, fathers were actively engaged in sharing their thoughts and feedback. Fathers were supportive of the proposed topics (see Figure 1) but offered

additional suggestions. Fathers in both focus groups expressed the desire for a session focused on emotional well-being and support. Along these lines, one father said:

I mean, emotionally is the number one thing, so I mean, anything that can be done to help men navigate this emotionally, especially early on, I mean, in the first few months of this going on, it's really a critical time.

Several other topic suggestions were parenting-related, such as managing children's behavior, effective communication with children, and communicating with children during separation. Fathers also suggested topics related to navigating complex coparenting dynamics, including those that involve extended families and cultural differences. More generally, fathers suggested content that focused on skill-building, navigating court systems and resources, and practical and tailored support. They also requested a guide or handbook with resources, strategies, and expectations around family court.

The proposed program structure was positively received by most fathers. They generally agreed that four to five sessions lasting 60–90 minutes was ideal but suggested flexible timing to ensure all participants were able to address their concerns. They also identified the need for providing recaps for fathers who were unable to attend scheduled virtual group sessions. Overall, fathers were agreeable to the virtual format while also mentioning the value of having face-to-face gatherings or connections with other fathers. We also asked fathers for their input on what would make this program appealing to fathers or encourage them to attend. Some suggestions that fathers offered in this area was to provide clear explanations of the program benefits and an explicit program agenda. They also recommended offering official recognition of program completion, such as a certificate, which could help fathers with placement and visitation. Finally, fathers indicated that program participants need to be convinced that the peer support program is

a safe, neutral, and supportive space for open discussion. This was summarized by one father who stated, “we seek a secure space where our words won’t be turned against us.”

### ***Program Outline***

In this section, we provide the details on the peer support program, including the adaptations and customizations we made based on feedback from Phase 1.

Feedback from the focus groups indicated that fathers supported the plan for four 60-minute sessions and expressed support for both virtual and in-person formats. For the first pilot test of the program, we decided to pursue the virtual (Zoom) option only. This format allowed us to include fathers living anywhere in Wisconsin and circumvent barriers to fathers’ in-person participation, such as transportation and childcare, thereby expanding our potential pool of participants and incorporating more diverse perspectives in this initial pilot test. Further, because we decided to pursue the “content expert” facilitator approach (see next paragraph), the virtual format allowed us to identify the best fitting expert without being limited by location. While we plan to move forward with testing an in-person format in future versions of the program, given the above considerations, a virtual format was ideal for this initial pilot.

Fathers also supported the proposed topic areas of parenting from a distance, navigating child support systems, and navigating custody, placement, and co-parenting, so those were retained for the final version. However, because fathers in both focus groups suggested we incorporate more content on mental health and managing stress and emotions, we added an additional session on emotional well-being. To achieve this while retaining the four-session structure, we combined the sessions on co-parenting and custody/placement given that these topics are often intertwined.



During the focus groups, fathers often discussed the need for individualized support or information that was tailored to their specific situation. Rather than try to prepare Extension educators for all possible circumstances, we opted to meet this need through engaging content experts for each session who co-facilitated with an Extension educator (see Table 1). We invited the director of the UW–Madison Family Law Clinic to co-facilitate the sessions on child support and custody/placement, a licensed professional counselor for the session on fathers’ mental health, and an Extension specialist with expertise in parental incarceration and parental separation for the session on parenting children from a distance. These experts helped identify the key content to cover during the session and were available to answer fathers’ questions during the discussion portion.

**Table 1: Four Session Fatherhood Peer Support Program Outline**

Session and Topic	Content	Expert Co-facilitator
<b>Session 1: Parenting from a Distance</b> <i>Week 1 Tuesday</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parenting while not with your children</li> <li>• Discussing difficult topics with your children</li> <li>• Emotional coaching skills (i.e., LEAPS<sup>a</sup>)</li> </ul>	Extension specialist with expertise in parental incarceration and parental separation
<b>Session 2: Child Support</b> <i>Week 1 Thursday</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Managing your child support order</li> <li>• What to do when you cannot pay child support</li> <li>• Modifying or adapting your child support order</li> </ul>	Director of a family law clinic
<b>Session 3: Placement/Custody and Working with your Co-Parent</b> <i>Week 2 Tuesday</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Working with your co-parent</li> <li>• Making the most of your time with your children</li> <li>• Understanding the differences between placement and custody</li> <li>• How to work with and/or modify custody/placement orders</li> </ul>	Director of a family law clinic
<b>Session 4: Emotional Well-Being</b> <i>Week 2 Thursday</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking care of yourself as a parent</li> <li>• Finding support from each other and from our communities</li> </ul>	Licensed family counselor and practitioner with expertise in fatherhood

**Note:** <sup>a</sup>LEAPS (Label, Empathize, And Problem Solve) is an emotion coaching strategy from the UW-Extension Strong Feelings program (Nix et al., 2020, <https://parenting.extension.wisc.edu/STRONG-FEELINGS>)

The final pilot program included four one-hour sessions held virtually via Zoom twice per week for two weeks (see Table 1). During each session, the facilitators started with an

introductory or warm-up question for the fathers (e.g., “*What brings you joy as a father?*”), followed by 15–20 minutes of instruction on the topic area and 30–40 minutes of facilitated dialogue among participants on the session topic. Content and discussion questions were shared on the screen via Google Slides. Participants were able to contribute to the discussion using both the chat function and by speaking aloud. Fathers were encouraged to join via video call, although a phone call-in option (audio only) was also available. Only one father used the phone call option for the two sessions that he attended—in that case, the information shared on the screen was either emailed or verbally read to him.

## **Phase 2: Pilot Program Evaluation**

### **Methods**

For Phase 2, we assessed program feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary effectiveness among a single cohort of fathers who attended the four-session pilot program. We adopted a mixed-methods approach to the pilot program evaluation, using both self-report surveys and a post-course focus group, which are described in detail below. Our quantitative assessments included six surveys administered via Qualtrics: one prior to the program, one after each of the four sessions, and a post-course survey (described in detail below) following the four-sessions. Each of the surveys are described below.

#### ***Pre-Course Survey***

The 15–20 minute survey that was completed prior to the start of the program captured fathers’ demographics, child and co-parenting circumstances, and experiences with child support and placement systems. The pre-course survey also included brief assessments on child support attitudes, parenting self-efficacy, general social support, and support from other fathers. These

assessments were included in the post-course survey as well to capture change in the measures from before to after the pilot program.

We assessed child support attitudes and experiences using two questions that assessed their beliefs about the difficulty of working with or getting information from child support services, and three that asked about level of confidence working with and getting information from child support services. For social support, we used six questions from the Protective Factors Survey (Counts et al., 2010) asking fathers about their access to help and social support (e.g., “*I have others who will listen when I need to talk about my problems*”; “*If I needed help finding a job, I wouldn’t know where to go for help*”). We also assessed father peer support using four questions on how often participants talk to other fathers about parenting, struggles, and positive experiences. Parenting self-efficacy was assessed using the Me as a Parent Short-Form questionnaire (Matthews et al., 2022), which includes four questions about parenting confidence and skills.

### ***Post-Session Surveys***

The short surveys following each program session captured fathers’ impressions of and experiences with that session. This included closed-ended questions on whether they learned anything, found the program helpful, and found the content easy to understand, and brief open-ended questions on what they liked and disliked about the program and any lingering questions they had.

### ***Post-Course Survey***

Following the focus group session, we employed a 10–15 minute post-course survey which asked fathers a series of questions assessing their impressions and feedback on the overall program, existing and planned behavior change as a result of the program, and changes in their

comfort or confidence in the key content areas (i.e., parenting from a distance, child support, placement and co-parenting, mental health). We also repeated the measures from the pre-course survey on child support attitudes, parenting self-efficacy, general social support, and support from other fathers.

### ***Post-Course Focus Group***

The qualitative portion of Phase 2 involved a 90-minute focus group with the fathers who participated in the four-session program. The goal of the focus group was to capture fathers' thoughts around the program, including what went well and what could be improved. The facilitated format of the focus group allowed fathers to openly share their thoughts and ideas and to provide more comprehensive and unstructured feedback than is typically provided in a survey format. Further, the group format allowed fathers to build off and expand on each other's ideas and thoughts. The focus group included questions on the program content and structure, the facilitators, and the peer support approach (see Appendix 3 for the full protocol). We held the focus group the week following the fourth and final program session; it was scheduled (and compensation provided) as though it was a fifth program session to encourage fathers' participation. The focus group was facilitated by the lead researcher and an Extension specialist, both of whom did not attend or facilitate any program sessions. This approach provided a sense of anonymity, such that fathers could be open about their feedback, including thoughts about the facilitators themselves. We encouraged fathers to be honest in their feedback by reminding them that their names and identifying information would be redacted from all data.

### ***Recruitment***

Fathers were recruited for the pilot study through UW-Extension educators and community partners. Using both flyers and email scripts, we invited fathers with at least one

child who does not live with them full-time to attend and provide feedback on “a new peer support program for fathers” (see Appendix 4). Fathers were eligible for the program if they had at least one child under the age of 18 who did not live with them full-time and if they resided in the state of Wisconsin. We sent personal invitations to the fathers who previously participated in Phase 1 to participate in the full four-session pilot program. We also asked all UW Extension educators to recruit in their local communities using flyers and email scripts. Finally, we shared recruitment materials with community partners (e.g., Extension educators, Urban League of Madison, Racine County ELEVATE) who regularly connect with or serve fathers, especially those who do not have primary placement. Fathers were compensated \$25 for each program session they attended with the opportunity to earn up to \$125 if they attended all four sessions and the post-course focus group.

### *Sample*

Nine fathers enrolled for the peer group pilot program and ranged in age from 25 to 57 years old ( $M = 38.9$  years,  $SD = 9.6$ ). One of the enrolled fathers also participated in Phase 1. Eight out of the nine participants identified as White; one participant identified as Black/African American. In terms of education, three participants had a high school diploma or GED, two had obtained some college education, two had obtained a four-year college degree, and two had an advanced degree (e.g., MS, PhD, MD). Five fathers were employed full-time, one was employed part-time, two were unemployed, and one described himself as self-employed. Only one father indicated not having any difficulty paying bills or meeting financial obligations, while five said “occasionally”, one said “frequently” and two said they “almost always” had difficulty paying bills. Four participants reported receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

benefits, two reported receiving Medicaid, and one reported receiving Unemployment benefits. Four participants reported no form of public assistance.

All participants were fathers of between one and three minor children ( $M = 1.7$  children,  $SD = 0.71$ ) who ranged in age from 1 to 16 years ( $M = 6.9$  years,  $SD = 5.4$ ). Among the five participants who reported more than one child, two of them also reported having more than one coparent. Eight out of nine fathers had placement orders for at least one child; one father with two children from the same coparent reported no formal placement order but having an “informal custody agreement that is currently working.” Only one father reported having no contact with his child in the last month. All other fathers reported seeing their children between 2 and 26 days in the last month ( $M = 9.6$  days,  $SD = 8.1$ ) and five of them reported spending overnights with their children as well. Most fathers (7 out of 9) reported being somewhat or very dissatisfied with their placement arrangement for at least one of their children. Among the eight fathers who reported having contact with at least one coparent, five of them reported having little to no conflict with the coparent.

Fathers were not required to have an active child support order to participate in the program. However, seven out of eight fathers reported paying child support for at least one of their children at the time of completing the survey. All seven of these fathers reported that child support causes at least a little financial burden, with three reporting that it causes a significant financial burden.

### ***Analysis Plan***

Quantitative data from the post-session and post-course surveys are presented as descriptive statistics, including frequencies and means. The pre- and post-test differences on measures of child support attitudes, parenting self-efficacy, general social support, and support

from other fathers were compared using Wilcoxon signed rank tests due to the small sample size. For the qualitative portion, we engaged in thematic coding (Braun & Clarke, 2012) of the focus group transcript using MAXQDA software. Focus group recordings were transcribed using an AI transcription service. A single coder, a UW-Extension Evaluation Specialist who co-facilitated the focus group, conducted the thematic analysis. Following the initial coding, we incorporated notes taken during a phone call with a participant who was unable to attend the focus group, feedback obtained from the Extension facilitators during a team meeting, and open-ended feedback from the post-session and post-course surveys. This triangulation of data helped solidify any salient feedback that may have been overlooked in the main analyses and incorporate the perspectives of those who attended or facilitated program sessions.

## **Results**

We first present descriptive statistics on recruitment, attendance, and engagement, and then proceed into feedback on the individual sessions from the post-session surveys. We then discuss feedback and evaluation of the overall program using both quantitative survey results and qualitative analysis from focus group transcripts and open-ended surveys.

### ***Recruitment and Interest***

A total of 23 fathers expressed interest in participating in the pilot program. All interested fathers—including all eight fathers from Phase 1, as well as fathers who were interested in Phase 1 but did not participate—were sent an email with details about the study and a link to sign up for an introductory call using an online scheduling platform. Five fathers signed up for introductory calls but did not show up for the call and did not respond to rescheduling attempts sent via email; this included two fathers from Phase 1. The remaining nine fathers did not respond to the initial email or additional follow up emails. All nine fathers who attended the

introductory calls signed informed consent and enrolled in the study. As stated earlier, one father from Phase 1 returned for Phase 2, while another father who expressed interest in Phase 1—but did not attend the focus groups—enrolled for the program.

Using an open-ended question in the pre-course survey, we asked fathers what they were most looking forward to when they participated in the program. Several fathers ( $n = 4$ ) identified looking forward to meeting and connecting with other fathers, while others were seeking information, skill-building, and advice related to fatherhood in general as well as the specific challenges that noncustodial fathers face. For some fathers, it was a combination of both knowledge and connection with other fathers. This was illustrated by one father who reported, “I am looking forward to hearing from other fathers about how they view and deal with certain situations. Also, anything I can do to build my skills as a parent so I can be a better father to my kids.”

### ***Program Attendance & Engagement***

All nine fathers who enrolled for the pilot program attended at least one program session and four attended all four program sessions. Of the remaining five fathers, one attended three sessions, two fathers attended two sessions, and two fathers only attended one session. One father had technical difficulties during the first session and was unable to join.

In terms of engagement, most fathers participated in the group discussion that followed the instructional portion of the session. Father participated through both the chat function in Zoom and by speaking aloud. As noted earlier, one participant used the phone call option instead of video call and so was unable to use the chat function but could share verbally. In the first two sessions, all but one father engaged in the discussion (6 out of 7 for Session 1; 5 out of 6 for Session 2). Engagement was lowest in session three, when only four of the seven fathers



participated in the group discussion, and highest in session four, during which all five fathers actively engaged in the discussion.

### ***Individual Session Feedback***

Following each session, participants completed a short survey capturing their experiences during the session. Across all questions, mean scores on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree) ranged from 3.29 to 4.80, suggesting that most participants agreed or strongly agreed with the session-specific questions (see Table 2). Most participants agreed that they felt connected to other fathers, felt comfortable sharing their perspectives, and that the session made them feel more connected to other people (see Table 2). For those that reported sharing/speaking during the session, they generally reported feeling heard and understood. The lowest mean scores were on the question asking whether the session provided them with new ways to connect to others, with mean scores falling below four for Sessions 1, 2, and 3.

In terms of content and structure, most participants said they learned something new, found the program to be helpful, and found the information easy to understand for all four sessions (see Table 3). In Session 2, there was one participant who indicated they did not learn something new or find the program helpful. Those that did not find the length of the session to be appropriate (Session 1 and Session 2) indicated that the sessions were too short.

In the final end-of-program survey, we asked fathers to rate the value of each program session on a scale from 0 (*Not at all valuable*) to 10 (*Very valuable*). Raw scores ranged from 3 to 10, with average scores ranging from 6.88 ( $SD = 2.10$ ) to 7.5 ( $SD = 2.07$ ). Overall, this suggests that most participants found the sessions to be at least somewhat valuable. Only one person rated the sessions on the lower half of the scale (less than five), suggesting this father did not find the program sessions to be very valuable.

**Table 2: Mean Scores of Questions about Peer Support Elements of Program by Session**

Range	Session 1: Parenting from a Distance (n = 7)			Session 2: Child Support (n = 6)			Session 3: Custody & Co-parenting (n = 7)			Session 4: Well-Being (n = 5)		
	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	
I felt connected to the other fathers in the group	1–5	4.00	1.41	1–5	3.80	1.64	3–5	4.14	0.69	4–5	4.60	0.55
I felt comfortable sharing my ideas and perspectives	2–5	4.00	1.15	2–5	4.20	1.30	2–5	4.29	1.11	4–5	4.60	0.55
Attending this session made me feel more connected to other people	3–5	4.29	0.76	1–5	3.60	1.67	3–5	4.00	1.00	4–5	4.60	0.55
Attending this session provided me with new ways to connect with others	2–5	3.29	1.25	1–5	3.40	1.82	2–5	3.86	1.07	4–5	4.80	0.45
In today’s session, there was at least one person I felt heard me	4–5	4.50	0.55	2–5	4.00	1.41	4–5	4.50	0.55	4–5	4.60	0.55
In today’s session, there was at least one person I felt understood me	3–5	4.33	0.82	4–5	4.50	0.58	4–5	4.33	0.52	4–5	4.80	0.45

*Note.* Response scale options were: ranged from 1 = *Disagree*; 2 = *Somewhat Disagree*; 3 = *Neither Agree nor Disagree*; 4 = *Somewhat Agree*; 5 = *Agree*. The last two questions were only displayed for participants who said they shared/spoke during the session.

**Table 3: Response Frequencies of Questions about Content and Structure of Program by Session**

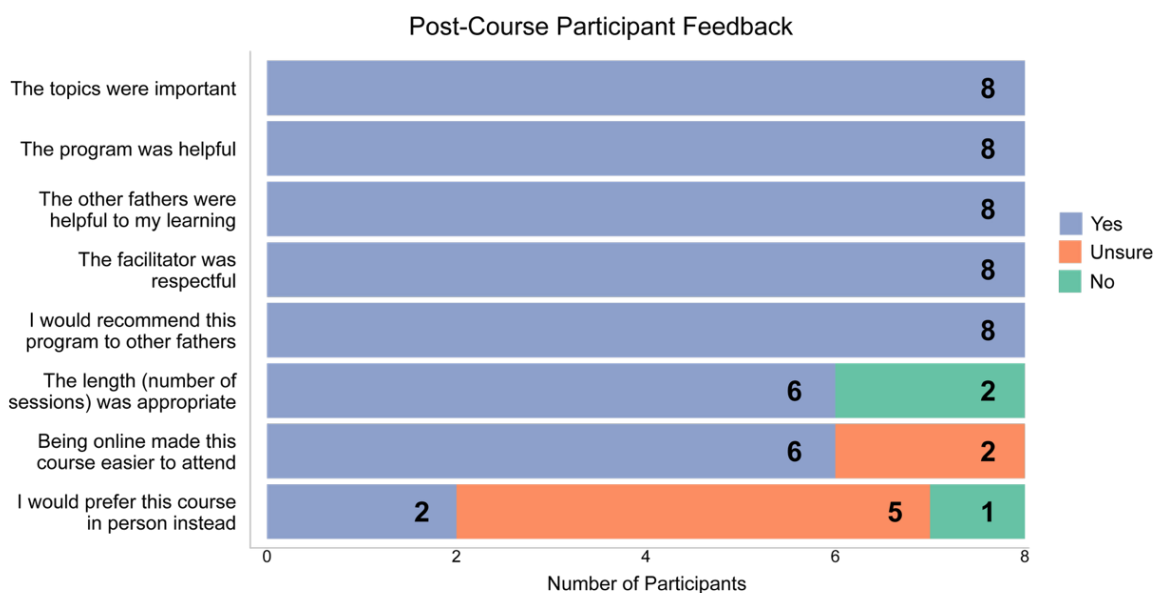
Post-Session Questions	Session 1: Parenting from a Distance (n = 7)			Session 2: Child Support (n = 6)			Session 3: Custody & Co-parenting (n = 7)			Session 4: Emotional Well-Being (n = 5)		
	Yes	Unsure	No	Yes	Unsure	No	Yes	Unsure	No	Yes	Unsure	No
I learned something new	7	—	—	4	1	1	6	1	—	3	2	—
The program was helpful to me	7	—	—	5	—	1	6	1	—	5	—	—
The length of the session was appropriate	6	—	1	5	—	1	6	1	—	5	—	—
The information was easy to understand	7	—	—	5	1	—	7	0	—	5	—	—

*Note.* Participants who responded “No” for length of session indicated that the session was too short in a follow-up question.

### Overall Program Evaluation

Eight out of the nine total fathers completed the post-course survey following the end of the program. All fathers who responded ( $n = 8$ ) agreed that the topics were important, the program was helpful, the facilitators were respectful, and the other fathers were helpful to their learning (see Figure 3). In addition, all fathers indicated they would recommend this program to other fathers. Regarding program structure, most fathers ( $n = 6$ ) reported that the length of the program (four sessions) was appropriate and that being online made the course easier to attend. Two fathers indicated they would prefer an in-person instead of virtual format for the course, while five others were unsure. Only one father indicated that they would not prefer an in-person format for the course.

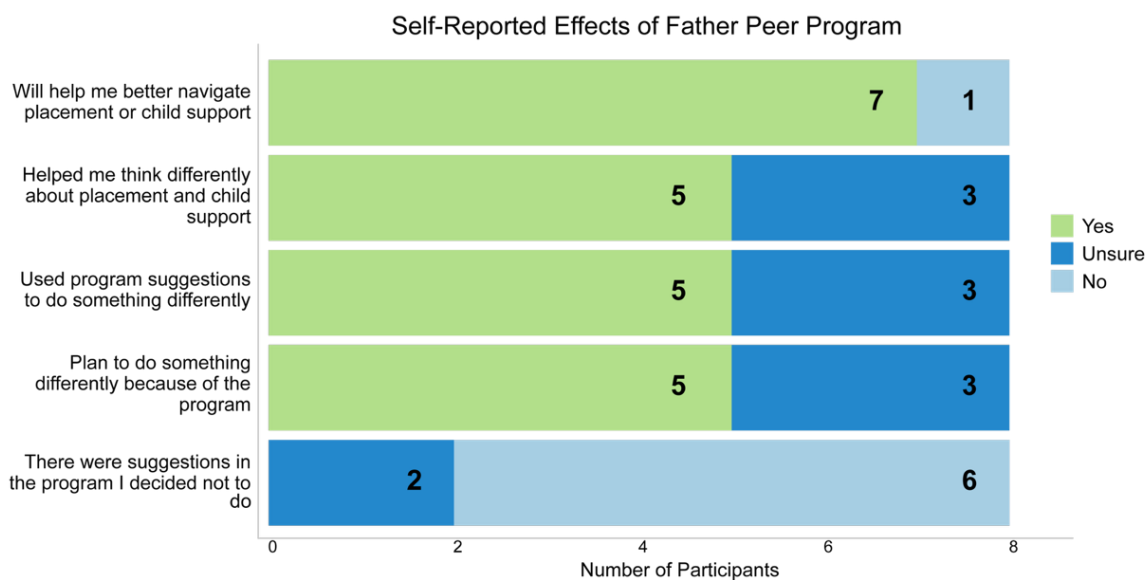
**Figure 3: Responses to Participant Feedback Questions from Post-Course Survey**



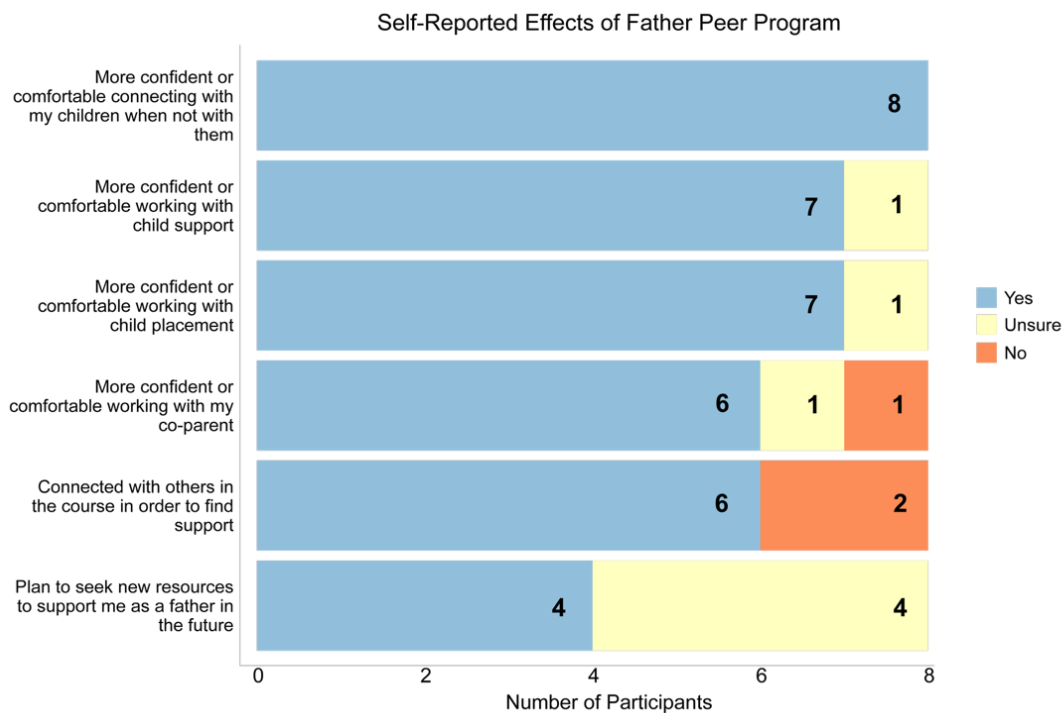
Regarding attitudes and behaviors on program topics, most fathers agreed that the program helped them think differently about ( $n = 5$ ) and better navigate ( $n = 7$ ) child support and placement (see Figure 4). Most fathers ( $n = 6$ ) also reported doing something differently, either

now or in the future, because of the program and only two fathers indicated there were suggestions from the program they decided not to. All fathers ( $n = 8$ ) agreed to feeling more comfortable connecting with their children when they were not with them (see Figure 5). Most fathers also agreed that they felt more confident or comfortable working with child support ( $n = 7$ ) and placement systems ( $n = 7$ ) and working with their coparent ( $n = 6$ ), and planned to seek out new resources to support them in their fatherhood role ( $n = 4$ ). Related to the peer support aspect of the program, most fathers ( $n = 6$ ) reported already connecting with other fathers from the course to get support (see Figure 5).

**Figure 4: Responses to Questions about Self-Reported Effects of Peer Support Program**

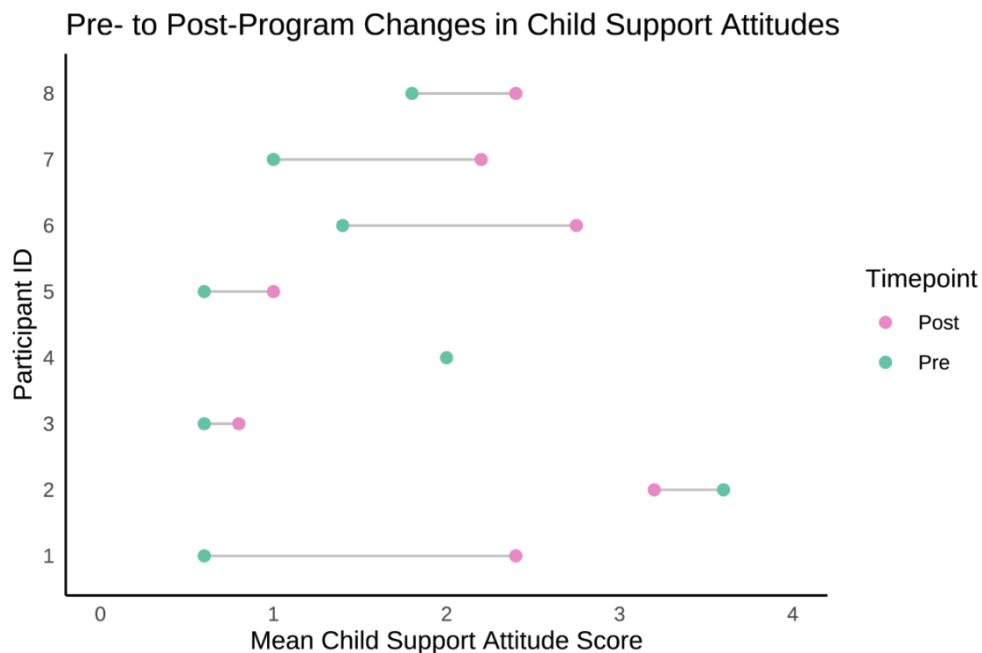


**Figure 5: Responses to Questions about Whether Program Changed Fathers' Confidence and Comfort with Program Topics**



Wilcoxon signed rank tests comparing pre- and post-course scores revealed that fathers reported significantly better attitudes toward the child support system after the program compared to before the program,  $M_{diff} = 0.74$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ,  $V = 2$ ,  $p = .046$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.77$  (large effect size) (see Figure 6). There were no significant changes in parenting self-efficacy, social support, or father peer support from before to immediately after the program.

**Figure 6: Changes in Child Support Attitudes from Before to After the Peer Support Program**



### ***Qualitative Feedback on Overall Program***

The qualitative results for Phase 2 include thematic analysis of the post-program focus group transcripts (see Appendix 3 for specific questions), open-ended questions from the post-session and post-course surveys, and feedback from Extension facilitators in a project meeting. The themes that emerged from this analysis fell into two overarching categories: *Program Benefits* and *Feedback for Program Improvement*. The individual themes are described below.

#### ***Program Benefits***

##### ***Theme: Peer Support Model Worked***

Fathers shared that it was helpful to talk through issues and learn different perspectives from other fathers. They described bouncing ideas off one another, hearing others' experiences including how they handle certain situations, and hearing ideas from other fathers that "were absolutely phenomenal and stuff I would have never thought of." Fathers cited talking through

specific issues like struggling to connect with children, and adolescent children struggling with their parents' divorce. One participant described the benefit of the peer support model as,

To me, the best part was the amount of crosstalk and support that dads gave each other. You know, this is the first space I've ever been in where it was particularly aimed at fathers. And I don't know, it's not real common in my experience to have that. You know what I mean? This is the first time I've ever seen anything like that. Pretty much all the way through, all the guys were really comfortable with each other and the bouncing ideas, given support.

The benefits of the peer support model were also mentioned by one facilitator, who shared:

And then by the middle they were, we were talking about social connections, and they all exchanged email addresses. And I thought that was just awesome, because just to show that connection, and they were saying, we don't really have friends. It's not like it is for women. It's making those connections or reaching out to each other is difficult. So, I just thought that was really, really a big win for them.

The diversity of men with different situations was described as a positive. One father shared:

Having the other guys be in it, was probably a really, really good part of it. Some of us are getting divorced, some of us have been divorced, some of us were never married, some of us have two kids. There's so many different facets of having all these different backgrounds of guys. I think those were good things.

And yet even with this diversity of experiences, one father shared how it still felt like other fathers understood him, "being able to share with other fathers, have other guys that are truly walking in your shoes in one way, shape, or form was helpful." Another father spoke to the back and forth between participants, "I found myself reflecting on other fathers' inputs and putting a spin on them to give back additional options." In addition, the topic of social isolation was described,

You know, as men, our social circles tend to be on the smaller side. And sometimes we can kind of convince ourselves that we are the first person to go through this and then saying, oh, other people are doing the same stuff is big.

The program fills an important gap in connecting fathers who have enough of a shared experience and desire that they do not fear opening up to one another:

The typical, our fathers, you don't talk about your feelings. Even if you're at work, or at church, or at your kids T ball, there's another single dad, you're still kind of hesitant to like, even bring up the idea. Because as men, we don't talk about our feelings. And so anybody that signed up for this course, wants to talk about their feelings. And so there's no fear of saying, you know, I'm depressed, it breaks my heart that, you know, I'm not this, the stern solid rock, that, you know, it's, it's killing me from the inside that I haven't seen my kids in three months, right, you're probably not comfortable walking up to the single dad, you know, that gets his kids, you know, every other day or whatever. And here's your first time seeing him in three months, and you're not going to open up [about] that.

***Theme: Presenters and Facilitators Were Well Received***

Fathers valued having experts present and specifically praised the lawyer and counselor (who was also a father). Most fathers in the focus group commented on the one male presenter in the program, who presented at the final session. They described him as phenomenal and engaging, and particularly liked having another male present.

The last session, [male presenter's name], he was really good. Kind of trying to get us to talk about connecting with our children and things like that. I thought that was fantastic. It was a really good discussion. Maybe more of that kind of content and sharing that kind of stuff. Beneficial.

Then, another participant shared:

The reason I think that the guys probably are picking up on that, in my humble opinion, is because he's a guy. You'll [female facilitators] never be a single father. You might be a single mother or whatever it may be. It was female, female, female, female, and finally, the last one, finally a dad, right? Not that it has to be all dads, but I think that that brought an extra special thing to it was to have a dad.

Another participant shared that the male presenter was “really, really helpful” regarding different ways to connect and expand a social support network and emotional well-being. “He definitely gave me some ideas I can see using in the real world.” One father participant even mentioned that the father presenter's topic “probably applied the least to me, but I think it was probably the



best part of the course.” Relatedly, the facilitator of that session mentioned how much the fathers seemed to value having another father present,

So I think what went really well is, in the middle of it, [facilitator]’s little son kept coming in the room, and it just made it so real for the parents to have that interruption. And he was doing some prompting with his child, and that was completely, you know, off, you know, not on script, but it really lightened the group.

Regarding having experts there in general, one father said, “I think having a facilitator in there that has experience in that particular field, like an expert in the field, and being able to answer questions, I thought was a great idea.” Another father said this about the lawyer, “to be able to pick the brain and hear from a true subject matter expert was priceless.”

In addition, they valued an Extension facilitator who demonstrated warmth and leadership. They said, “she snubbed a guy from woman bashing and made him feel good about it.” They elaborated,

She did a really great job, even when she had to nip it in the bud when one guy was just going off about his ex. Everybody needs a place to vent, but it really wasn’t on topic. She did a really good job of reeling it back in, but validating that his feelings weren’t right or wrong, they’re his feelings.

This father later shared more about this, “She was able to refocus, and just be the referee and let the guys talk. But the guys felt like they were just talking to her. And it’s just [facilitator name], we can talk to her every week.”

***Theme: Positive Outcomes Were Attained***

Fathers reported specific behavior changes that resulted from the program like accepting their child’s emotions and being more honest with their children, since the course began. One father shared,

There have been times when I’ve been with my child and I would normally feel as though them feeling sad or angry wasn’t valid. I now stop myself and reflect on how their feelings are theirs and not mine to determine.

Another father also explained, “since taking this program, I have been more honest with my children, instead of trying to filter the information I give them with white lies I feel is appropriate.”

Another father described sharing resources from the program with others. In addition, three fathers reported behavioral intentions related to self-care, and seeking social connection and legal assistance, due to the program:

- “I plan to take time for just myself rather than focusing on my child 24/7.”
- “The way I interact with other fathers socially, like I won’t be as afraid to make initial contact with other fathers in public spaces.”
- “I will be seeking legal assistance sooner rather than later.”

***Theme: Strong Father Engagement***

Both fathers and facilitators mentioned that fathers were very engaged in the sessions and most fathers participated. One father said,

I’ve done a handful of Extension parenting classes; we did some with my wife when we were together, and some alone. And interestingly, kind of surprisingly, I found that group participation in this father’s-only group was higher than it was in mixed gender groups, which tended to be more female than male. I guess the men seem to actually be more willing to talk.

One facilitator talked about how the structure of the program helped with fathers’ comfort and engagement: “I think the content was what they were needing to hear. You know, the first part seemed to kind of disarm the group, and then they opened up more in the second half.” Another facilitator discussed the father engagement in terms of how much they supported each other:

They were like, ‘Yeah, well, you were saying that’s a great idea, and here’s how I do’ and like, they were giving each other advice. It was just very energizing. [...] It seemed like they were just so supportive of one another. [...] One would ask a question and like, another guy would answer.

***Theme: Content and Topics were Beneficial***

While all sessions and content were appreciated, fathers seemed to be especially grateful for the content on child support and custody/placement. One father specifically mentioned, “The stuff on child support and custodial stuff was all really valuable. And I liked it. And I would keep it in the program.” One of the Extension facilitators shared similar thoughts, “The child support one I co-facilitated with [facilitator], and she’s from UW Law School, and had a lot of technical information, and [...] I thought the dads ate it up. Like they appreciated concrete information.”

Fathers also appreciated the content on emotional well-being and mental health. One father reported in the post-session survey, “I think this topic could be an entire series unto itself.” Other fathers indicated that it was their favorite session and “This session, I felt like I related on a much greater level to things other dads were talking about.”

*Suggestions for Program Improvement*

***Theme: Program Structure - Extend and Space Out Existing Content***

Fathers requested more sessions, having each topic span at least two sessions, change frequency to weekly versus twice per week, and having optional preparation or reflective work to do between sessions.

Fathers also asked that each session be scheduled for 90 minutes rather than 60, with the last 30 minutes being an optional time to stay on and continue discussing and connecting with other fathers, or to have time for revisiting a prior topic or starting a new topic in preparation for the next session. They stated that sometimes the conversation was just getting interesting and then the meeting ended. These qualitative findings align with the quantitative feedback on individual sessions (see above) where two fathers indicated that sessions were too short. The

facilitators also noted feeling like sometimes fathers were more succinct because they were running out of time.

**Table 4: Overview of Specific Suggestions for Program Improvement**

Specific Suggestion	Illustrative Quote(s)
More sessions, having each topic span at least two sessions	<p>Sometimes it did also feel a bit rushed. I think like [other father] said, this could have been 12 sessions, I felt like each session topic, frankly, could have been its own five sessions.</p> <p>The discussions like [other father] said, were so good, and it was kind of a self led group. But then, we'd get into a good talk, and then the next time we met, it was a totally different topic. And sometimes, I didn't feel like we were done with the last one yet.</p> <p>Start with talking about last week's session, the first 45 minutes, then the second 45 minutes, you talk about the new topic, that would work to have time to process it and digest it. And then you can come back with you know, 'I was thinking about this over the weekend.'</p>
Change frequency to weekly versus twice per week	I would attend these year round. I don't know if I could do it two nights a week. Two nights a week really kind of seemed rough.
Include optional reflective work	So I don't disagree with the homework [idea], but I wouldn't make it feel mandatory—that seems off putting. Make it one or two questions and make it more personal, like bring an example of the best time you had with your kid, right? There were a lot of questions that got brought up and we would [answer] it but we had no time to prepare. And then maybe after we said it, we were like, oh, you know, what was better [answer]?
Submit questions in advance	Maybe if you can't make a session or something, maybe being able to submit questions before the session rather than after so you know, if I know my kid has practice, or I have to work that night, but I have a topical question that I'd like to have addressed, and then that can be talked about. Or even, I'm going to be at the session, just to give the expert on that topic a chance to look into it and have a more prepared answer.
Lengthen each session to 90 minutes	An hour on the dot was a little bit too rigid, because there were times where the guys were just talking and sharing and all of a sudden, it's 50 after and the presenters are thinking, 'Oh, no, I gotta wrap this up.' Right? When in reality, if we were to schedule it for an hour and a half, and [if at] an hour and five, everybody's just standing there, like deer in headlights, you end early,

***Theme: Program Structure - Build in Connection Outside of Sessions***

Fathers asked for ways to stay connected outside of sessions, such as through a message app. When one father requested to be able to call facilitators to get support outside of sessions, another father replied,

I think that because the program really is supposed to be peer to peer, I think that as long as guys are okay with it, if all of a sudden you're just feeling overwhelmed, stressed, you have a question... us guys are supposed to be the bonded group... if we're all in a telegram [messaging app] group, or whatever app there is, then at nine o'clock at night, you can, you can throw it out there. Because I don't think [program staff name's] is answering voicemails at night, especially on a Saturday night. But [father's name] and I are just sitting back having a couple brewskis, we all of a sudden see how he's coming in—he's really stressed, "my wife won't let me talk to my kid, what should I do?" And I think that would be a good option for in between the sessions.

This father also recalled how another father had asked for everyone's email during one of the sessions, as evidence that some fathers would like to stay connected with each other. They discussed how a group with fathers from the Extension program would be better than some existing groups for fathers that are open to all fathers.

*Father 1:* I'm actually on a page on Facebook. It's like dads assisting dads where they can go and talk to him. And they ask and then the other dads will [give] their input and then kind of help them out a little bit.

*Father 2:* The Facebook group that he belongs to, these could be guys that really think they know everything, in reality, they know nothing, right? Versus the guys that are in this group and past groups, the future groups are all trying to get the knowledge and we should all be hearing this very similar message. And so when you know how he runs into something that we talked about three weeks ago, the guys in this group [and] in past groups will have talked about it, have learned the tools, the bullet points that were given by you guys [facilitators]. And so I don't say we're more knowledgeable than, say randos on in a Facebook group, but we have a lot more common denominators.

They also said the group could include fathers who took the program at different times, "If you have enough guys, especially if you included past participants, then I think that would help the

bonding experience as well.” Finally, they thought it made sense for an Extension facilitator to moderate or be a part of the group,

I definitely think the facilitators need to be involved. Pray for the best and prepare for the worst. Somebody needs to be there to be the referee to say, ‘All right, guys, you violated the 10 rules of this group. This is your one and only warning if it happens again, you’re getting kicked out.

***Theme: Program Content: Add New Topics***

Fathers suggested several ideas for additional topics including how to play with your children, including specific ideas for girl children and children of different ages; daily tips for raising girls (e.g., doing hair); and placement schedules for children of different ages. Fathers also asked for emotional intelligence tools and tricks (for both fathers and children), and education on coping mechanisms and how to deal with frustration or anger as a parent. For example,

I don’t care how great all of our kids are, we have the moments where we get mad and say things or yell, or whatever it may be, that later we feel guilty or feel bad about. What are some other things we can do? You know, let that steam off in a positive way. Or ways that’s not gonna negatively affect your kid, specific skill building type stuff. I love my kids to the end of the earth. But I mean, you have the moments where I get so mad, I feel like my top’s gonna blow off. You know what I mean?

In general, fathers asked for education that included different considerations depending on the ages of children. Managing money was also brought up as a potential topic, depending on the needs of the specific group of fathers. There might be an opportunity to design some of the content around the group, as one participant suggested,

Organically, you have a group of 12 guys, and they all have to work on coping mechanisms, because they all got an angry streak in them. But none of them need to know how to manage money. That’s where you kind of just throw out those simple parents skills and see which one takes with the group.

Related to the theme of extending and spacing out existing content, above, one father wanted more content on an existing topic: connecting with children. Similarly, in the post-session surveys, some fathers mentioned wanting more content covered and questions answered around both child support and custody. For example, one father wrote “Wanting more information about what will happen in court, what to do, what to expect.”

***Theme: Interested in Consistent Extension Facilitator(s)***

Fathers shared that they noticed one facilitator read from their notes and was less engaging than others. In response to this feedback, the focus group facilitator asked, “Would it be helpful if it was the same Extension facilitator the whole time (for all sessions)?”

One father described, “There are pros and cons to switching it up versus having the same person but overall, probably better to have a consistent Extension person and then maybe swapping up the topical experts for certain sessions.” This father also later said, “Guys are kind of slow to open up sometimes. So having that common facilitator can maybe make us more comfortable.”

Another father saw the benefit of switching facilitators to avoid the program being “tedious and monotonous” and suggested “a dynamic duo... so the first night you have two people, and then some nights are both of them some nights, it’s one or the other. But there’s still that consistency.”

***Theme: Ideas for Increasing Participation and Attendance***

Some fathers indicated that they would have been more engaged if they had received more useful reminders about the program or recordings of the sessions. Two fathers stated the biggest barrier to attending sessions was forgetting about them. They mentioned that with busy schedules, text messages (rather than email) would have helped them remember or they could

have joined late. Similarly, some fathers mentioned that recording sessions would be helpful so they could view it later if they missed it. One father said, “I can spend half an hour that night before bed [viewing]. And then the next night, I could watch the other half an hour.” He also desired to share the recording with others in his network (e.g., his girlfriend, mother, male neighbor). When we discussed confidentiality possibly being a barrier to sharing recordings outside the group, one father suggested blurring out videos and names of fathers and only making the audio available for later viewing.

Relatedly, a few fathers indicated they could have been better prepared for the program by more clearly understanding that it was a peer support model (compared to a typical educational program focused on instruction) and by reviewing an outline of sessions. This relates to the finding above (Table 4) where fathers suggested content spanning two sessions to give them more time to process the information and have more thoughts to share.

Fathers were generous in offering suggestions for program improvement, but overall seemed very pleased with the program. One father was not able to answer the question about the worst parts of the program, “I can’t even really think of what my least favorite or the worst part was; I didn’t think any of it was bad at all, really. So I can’t really help you with that [question].”

## **DISCUSSION**

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The primary goal of this study was to develop and evaluate the feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary effectiveness of a peer support program for noncustodial fathers. We accomplished this by incorporating the perspectives of noncustodial fathers into the program development and evaluation. Based on feedback from fathers, we developed a four-session virtual program that covered topics on parenting while separated from your children, working with child support, co-parenting and custody/placement, and fathers’ mental health.



Overall, our findings suggest that the program was well-liked by fathers. All fathers who signed up for the program attended at least one session and “forgetting” was the primary reason for non-attendance. Most fathers actively participated in the group discussions during each session. The fathers who attended the Phase 1 focus group on development of the program agreed that they would like a program like this and the fathers in the Phase 2 focus group (following program completion) were highly enthusiastic about the program, wishing for longer and more sessions, as well as additional ways to connect outside of the formal program. These findings align with father feedback from other group-based interventions in which fathers requested that sessions be longer or to potentially attend more sessions (Cederbaum et al., 2024). Fathers especially liked having a content expert join the session and reported positive experiences with those facilitators. The quantitative findings supported what fathers said in the focus group, such that they generally reported finding the program to be helpful and informative, feeling comfortable sharing their ideas and perspectives, and connecting well with the other fathers in the group. All eight fathers who completed the end-of-program survey indicated they would recommend this program to other fathers. Together, these results suggest that our four-session peer support program is a feasible and highly acceptable approach to reaching noncustodial fathers.

Further, our findings provide preliminary evidence that this program may be an effective method for supporting noncustodial fathers in their parenting role, including increasing their knowledge of child support systems. Most fathers agreed that they could better navigate child support and placement/custody systems and felt more comfortable working with these systems because of the program. Nearly all fathers also indicated current or future plans to implement suggestions from the program into their lives. All fathers reported feeling more comfortable

connecting with their children after the program and most had already connected with other fathers from the program. Comparing scores from before the program started, there was a significant increase in positive attitudes and beliefs about child support services. While surveys on social support and parenting self-efficacy did not demonstrate significant effects, we had a small sample, and other measures indicated that fathers still had positive experiences in these areas. Together, these results suggest that a program offering brief, targeted education and information on relevant topics but centers around peer support, may be an effective tool for helping noncustodial fathers access resources and knowledge about the child support system as well as related topic areas.

In addition to positive feedback, fathers also offered several suggestions for improving the program in the future. They suggested having more exposure to each topic and each other, such as by having each session last longer and potentially span across multiple sessions. They expressed the desire to have more time reflecting on the material so that they could meaningfully contribute to group discussions. They liked the idea of having content experts, but recommended having the same Extension educator co-facilitate each time to provide consistency and familiarity. Of note, fathers asked for more structured ways to connect outside of the course. They repeatedly expressed the value of coming together to talk to other fathers about their experiences and emotions and were looking for more places and opportunities to engage in this peer support.

Relatedly, there were mixed findings around the virtual format of the course. In the Phase 2 findings, most fathers indicated the virtual format made the course easier to attend, while a few fathers indicated that they preferred an in-person format. In the Phase 1 focus group, fathers emphasized the value of face-to-face gatherings and opportunities to connect with other local

fathers. Our findings suggest that there are tradeoffs to both approaches, and there is not a clearly preferred modality. It may prove worthwhile to test an in-person format of the program to more fully understand the benefits and drawbacks of each approach, rather than comparing the virtual course to a hypothetical in-person version.

Our findings and feedback on the program align well with previous research that emphasizes fathers' preferences for peer support and mentorship models for parent education (Allport et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2016; Kerr et al., 2022). Further, our results suggest a peer support model meets several previously established unmet needs for fathers, such as a safe space to express emotions and opportunities to strengthen their support networks (Kerr et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2018; Roy & Dyson, 2010). Fathers often express feeling stigmatized in parenting spaces (Kerr et al., 2022) and not feeling comfortable sharing their emotions and experiences with other fathers due to societal expectations around emotional expression in men (Vogel et al., 2014). Based on our pilot data, it appears that peer support models may overcome these challenges by providing a dedicated and intentional space for fathers to come together and speak openly about their emotions. Despite these potential benefits, few programs like this exist (Henry et al., 2020; Roy & Dyson, 2010). More effort should be devoted by researchers and practitioners to create programs where fathers can support each other and learn about parenting together.

## **Limitations**

While the results of this initial pilot evaluation of the peer support program are promising, this study also has its limitations. First, this pilot evaluation only included the experiences of nine fathers, and among those nine fathers, only eight completed the post-course survey and only five shared their perspectives in the post-course focus group. Further, not all

fathers attended all sessions. It is likely that the feedback we received at each step in the evaluation was skewed by whose feedback was considered and which sessions they attended. We are also missing information on the barriers to attending the program from those who did not offer feedback. We made attempts to contact the individuals who did not attend many sessions or who did not attend the focus group, but our success was limited. A participant who only attended one session did attend the focus group, and the lead researcher was able to contact another participant by phone who missed two out of four sessions. However, feedback on nonattendance remains limited. Future evaluations of this program should include more cohorts to capture more complete and representative feedback and more systematic ways to assess barriers to attendance.

Relatedly, both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of this project each only included one father of color. The lack of racial diversity limits the conclusions we can draw about how this program might work in other populations of fathers. Given the intersection of race and gender, fathers of color experience fatherhood differently than White fathers (Cole & Lipscomb, 2022; Wallace, 2023) and would likely experience this program differently as well. Further, being the only person of color in the peer support program likely influenced this participants' experiences of peer support. In post-course feedback, this participant did note the lack of racial diversity but mentioned that the conversation still flowed naturally and was a positive experience for him. Although we did have multiple facilitators who identified as people of color, this is likely not as beneficial in a program that has an explicit focus on peer support. It will be important for researchers to intentionally recruit a more diverse group of fathers in future cohorts, allowing all fathers to maximize opportunities for connection and shared experience. We aim to achieve this by offering the program in Spanish and more actively recruiting among community partners who serve fathers of color.

Finally, the scope of this project was focused on program development and initial evaluation. Therefore, the efficacy data we captured was minimal and consisted only of pre- and post-test self-reported data in a small sample. While outside the scope of the current project, we have tentative plans to conduct an expanded pilot during 2025–26 that incorporates the lessons learned, reaches a broader cross-section of noncustodial fathers, assesses different modalities, and supports a more rigorous evaluation of program efficacy. In particular, we aim to address the recruitment challenges we faced, primarily in Phase 1, by translating recruitment materials into Spanish and working with community partners to do more specific and targeted recruitment, allowing us to obtain a larger and more diverse sample in the next iteration of the program.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE, AND RESEARCH**

This study suggests several important implications for future programs and support services that serve noncustodial fathers.

### **Continued Investment in Peer Support Programs for Fathers**

The fathers in this study repeatedly emphasized the value of having a space to come together and share experiences, both for their mental health and social support, but also for having others with which to brainstorm ideas for navigating challenges around child support, co-parenting, parenting, and placement/custody. Findings from this study highlight the importance of programs that provide education to fathers around these topics, but also bring fathers into a shared space to learn together and from each other. These findings are supported by previous research documenting the need for peer support programs (Allport et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2016; Kerr et al., 2022) and fathers' desires to be respected, trusted, heard, and not judged (Campbell et al., 2015).

## **Developing Targeted and Individualized Programs and Services**

In both phases of this project, participating fathers expressed the need for programs and services that provide support tailored to their specific situation. Fathers in the Phase 1 focus group mentioned the need for case managers or parent advisors that could provide support while having a deeper understanding of their family situation. Fathers who attended the peer support program discussed the value of having an expert in family law answer their questions and provide specific information about child support and placement. To the extent possible, programs that offer this type of service may help fathers better understand their situation and potentially result in greater compliance with child support.

## **Programmatic Support for Men and Fathers' Mental Health**

Based on the feedback from fathers in Phase 1 of our project, we included a program session on emotional well-being and mental health and invited a licensed professional counselor to co-facilitate. Several fathers expressed that this was their favorite session of the program. Given that many fathers report negative psychological consequences related to being a noncustodial father (Costanzo et al., 2024; Dudley, 1991; Waller & Plotnick, 2001), and men are less likely than women to seek help for mental health due to stigma and gender roles (Vogel et al., 2014), providing support as part of a peer support program focused on noncustodial parenting may be a fruitful avenue for bolstering men's coping skills and mental health.

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## **APPENDIX 1: PHASE 1 FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL**

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### **Welcome people in & Introduction of focus group**

Thank you all, once again, for meeting with us today. The reason for this focus group interview is to get your advice on a program we are creating to help support fathers who do not have primary custody of their children, or whose children do not live with them most of the time.

First, we will go ahead and introduce ourselves, go over logistics, and then we'll tell you a little bit about the program. **[FACILITATOR INTRODUCTIONS]**

Over the next hour and a half or so, I'll be asking questions about your experience as a father or caregiver and your opinion on a number of things related to our program. **[INSERT NAME]** will be taking notes.

Before getting started, I want to ask your permission about a few things:

*Recording:* I'll be recording the discussion so that we can type up the conversation and review it later on. We will only keep the recordings long enough to transcribe them and your feedback will be completely confidential.

*Note Taking:* **[INSERT NAME]** will take notes throughout the focus group to help keep track of our discussion. They will be asked to give a brief summary of what was discussed at the end of the session today.

If any question I ask is too personal or makes you feel uncomfortable, please feel free to not answer that one. Throughout the duration of the focus group, please feel free to answer as many or as few questions as you feel comfortable. For the sake of time, I may have to have us move on to the next question before everyone gets a chance to answer. I also want to remind you that you may stop the interview at any point.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

### **PROGRAM DESCRIPTION**

Great! Next, I will briefly describe the program we are hoping to get your opinions on. A few years ago, we collected data from fathers and community partners who serve families to get more information about fathers' experiences and the support they need. One of the things we found in that report was that fathers who do not have full custody of their children are looking for support figuring out what to do when working with the child support and custody systems as well as relationships with their children's other parent(s). The other thing we found is that fathers want to talk to and get support from other fathers, or what we call "peer support". The program we are trying to create is a response to these two issues.

The program is aimed to be a peer support program where instructors will provide a little bit of information and then some questions for fathers to help them get their discussion started. The rest of the time will be dedicated to letting fathers talk to and support each other. We are aiming to have anywhere from 2 to 6 sessions, with each one lasting about one hour each.

The topics we are thinking about including would be: 1) managing custody and visitation issues; 2) figuring out how to work with child support systems; 3) strategies for parenting when away from your children; and 4) co-parenting (e.g., relationships with your children's other parents). We are not tied to any of these ideas, and are hoping to get your opinion on what would be the most helpful to you and other fathers you know. [SLIDE SHARED WITH FATHERS, VIA SCREEN SHARE AND LINK]

***Helpful example prompts for interviewer:***

- “You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_ before, but just now you mentioned \_\_\_\_\_. Can you explain that some more?”
- “Can you give me some examples of \_\_\_\_\_?”
- “Remember what you were saying about \_\_\_\_\_? Can you tell me more about that?”
- “Would you mind elaborating on that?”

**WARM UP QUESTION(S)**

Next, we will have each of you introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your children. What are their ages and what do you like most about them?

**CHILD SUPPORT, CUSTODY, AND FATHERING**

*In this first domain of the focus group, the interviewer will begin by asking fathers to describe their experiences of working with the child support or custody systems. Questions will be asked about the types of challenges that they faced regarding father involvement and the specific needs and wants that children have during this time.*

- Tell us about a time that was challenging when working with the child support, child custody, or the court system.
- When you have experienced challenges working with these systems, how have you navigated them?

**FATHERING SUPPORTS AND SERVICES**

*In this domain of questions, fathers will be asked about the types of services that they took part in, specifically honing in on what was helpful. In the case of fathers who did not take part in custody/child support services or support, the interviewer will ask about barriers to services. The section will close by asking questions as to what supports, programs, services, or resources would be most helpful to fathers, even if they do not yet exist or are difficult to access in the area.*

- What types of services, programs, or resources are helpful to fathers working with the child support, child custody, or court system?
  - o In your experience, what makes these supports positive, helpful, or effective?
  - o What makes it difficult for fathers to use these services?
- If you could design a program or services for families where fathers and children live apart, what would you suggest?

- What specific needs do you wish there was support for? This might include something that there is support for, but it could be better.

## **CURRICULUM and OTHER PROGRAM COMPONENTS**

*This section of the focus group will allow fathers to provide feedback on Focus on Fathers, a curriculum for fathers whose children do not live with them full-time. This program will be tested in the next phase of the study. The goal is to obtain feedback about the topics covered in the curriculum, cultural relevance, number of sessions, and the supportive program components that will accompany the curriculum.*

### **PROVIDE TOPIC LIST TO FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS (via slide and link)**

- In looking over the topic list, what are the top 3 sessions that you believe would be most helpful for fathers working with child support and/or child custody systems? Can you describe your reasoning?
- What topics do you feel are unnecessary?
- If you could add topics to this list, what would you want to add?
- What do you think of the amount of sessions? Do you feel it is too many or too few?
- What do you think of the length of sessions? Too short or too long?
- What would be your preferred way to participate in this program—in person or online (via Zoom or other program). And why?

## **MODIFICATIONS/TAILORING STRATEGIES**

*In this domain, the interviewer will ask for advice about how a community-based program can best be tailored to fit the needs of fathers who do not have primary custody. They will be able to offer input on location, service provision, schedule, accessibility, and wrap-around services.*

- What would make it possible for fathers to attend these programs?
  - *Probe for:* transportation, refreshments, childcare, financial incentives, etc.
- [IF TIME] What sort of complimentary programs or services would be helpful to offer alongside or after this program?
  - For example, would it be useful to have longer-term, ongoing online mentoring or coaching after the program ended to help with issues related to paying child support or managing custody/visitation issues?
  - *If not addressed earlier, probe for:* guided social support groups, therapeutic support, general parent/child activities

## **PERCEIVED UPTAKE**

*To follow this, the researcher will inquire about perceived uptake and engagement in the program. In this, they will be able to offer input on who should be involved to ensure it is the most appropriate for fathers and families.*

- Do you think fathers would be open to going to a program like this?
  - Follow up if it seems necessary: Can you expand on why or why not?
- [IF TIME] What do you think about a program that is focused only on fathers? Are there any other individuals that should be included?

## CLOSING

*Lastly, the interviewer will ask some closing questions.*

- Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your story of fatherhood, experiences with child support and custody, or thoughts for a community-based intervention for fathers that we haven't talked about?
  - If you have more to share, feel free to add it to the chat or you can send us an email at [focusonfathers@sohe.wisc.edu](mailto:focusonfathers@sohe.wisc.edu). We'd love to hear any thoughts or ideas you have.
- **There's a possibility for more involvement in the future. Is this something you'd be interested in? What would you be interested in helping with?**
  - If not addressed earlier, probe for: leadership, offering feedback, trying the program, helping us figure out if the program works

Thank you all so much for all your time today and for sharing your experiences and thoughts. We greatly appreciate it.

Before we close, I would like to open it up to **[INSERT NOTE TAKER'S NAME]** to provide us with a brief summary of some of the topics we touched on in our conversation today.

Does that sound like a good summary of what we discussed today? Does anyone have any questions or anything to add to the notes?

## APPENDIX 2: PHASE 1 RECRUITMENT FLYERS

---

# WANT TO SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH

# CHILD SUPPORT, CUSTODY, AND FATHERING?

If you are a father who does not have primary custody of their children, we'd like to hear your thoughts on a new program for fathers.

You will be asked to participate in a 1-1.5 hour group discussion via Zoom and be eligible to receive a \$25 Amazon gift card as compensation.



To sign up, scan QR code or  
click or tap here:  
<https://forms.gle/1yWBW8Puw7bhWWWDA>



Questions? Contact [focusonfathers@sohe.wisc.edu](mailto:focusonfathers@sohe.wisc.edu)



## WANT TO SHARE YOUR EXPERIENCES WITH

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## **APPENDIX 3: PHASE 2 FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL**

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### **Welcome and Introduction to Focus Group**

Good evening!

Thank you for being willing to come together to talk about the peer support fathering program.

Today we would like to learn about your experience with the program. The program is in the pilot phase, and we need and appreciate your feedback to let us know what worked well and what we can change to make it better. We want to be thoughtful about how we move forward with the program, and want to make sure that what we develop is based on what fathers tell us about their experiences taking the program and implementing it at home. This is why we are so appreciative of your time today.

First and foremost we want you to know that, just as with all other parts of the program, participating is completely voluntary. If you decide you do not want to participate, you can opt out at any point.

The risks to participate are similar to those of the program: it may be hard to talk about these experiences depending on your own experience and comfort level. Know that you do not have to answer any question if you feel uncomfortable. While at times we may ask, “Does anyone else have anything to add?” to make sure that all participants have a space to share and because we’d love to hear everyone’s voice, there is no pressure to share at any point. Please feel free to reach out in any way that is comfortable, such as reaching out to the study team directly, or sending an email, if you would like to add to what is said here.

First, we will go ahead and introduce ourselves, go over logistics, and then we’ll ask questions about the program. **[FACILITATOR INTRODUCTIONS]**

Over the next hour or so, I’ll be asking questions about your experience in the program and your opinion on a number of things related to our program. **[INSERT NAME]** will be taking notes.

Before getting started, I want to ask your permission about a few things:

*Recording:* I’ll be recording the discussion so that we can type up the conversation and review it later on. We will only keep the recordings long enough to transcribe them and your feedback will be completely confidential.

*Note Taking:* **[INSERT NAME]** will take notes throughout the focus group to help keep track of our discussion. They will be asked to give a brief summary of what was discussed at the end of the session today.

If any question I ask is too personal or makes you feel uncomfortable, please feel free to not answer that one. Throughout the duration of the focus group, please feel free to answer as many or as few questions as you feel comfortable. For the sake of time, I may have to have us move on to the next question before everyone gets a chance to answer. I also want to remind you that you may stop the interview at any point.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

Okay, let's go ahead and get started.

***Helpful example prompts for interviewer:***

- *“You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_ before, but just now you mentioned \_\_\_\_\_. Can you explain that some more?”*
- *“Can you give me some examples of \_\_\_\_\_?”*
- *“Remember what you were saying about \_\_\_\_\_? Can you tell me more about that?”*
- *“Would you mind elaborating on that?”*

**Intro/Warm Up Questions**

- Please briefly introduce yourself and tell us why you chose this program.

**Overall Experience**

The next set of questions will be about your experiences in the program.

- What was the experience of participating in this program like for you?
- What was the best part of the program? The worst?
- What did you expect the program to be about when you signed up? Was it what you expected?

**Changes/Improvements/Effectiveness**

The next set of questions will focus on ways that the program was effective, as well as aspects that could be changed or improved.

- What supports would have been helpful for you that were not in the program? What could we have done to better support you? What, if anything, do you feel was missing from the program?
- What would you like to see done differently if we ran this program again?
- What would it mean to you to say that the program “worked”? How would we know if it was useful/helpful to you or other fathers?

**Safety and Connections**

The next set of questions will be about your experience with the facilitators and each other. As a reminder, your names will not be tied to your feedback, so please feel free to share your honest opinions.

- Did you feel safe, or not very safe, to express your opinions, feelings, and experiences in this course? How comfortable was it participating, and what would have made you feel safer and better able to openly express yourself?
- The goal of this program was to help foster connections and support among fathers themselves. Do you feel like that component of the program was useful to you? How could it have been better?

**Additional Questions**

- What, if any, do you see as your biggest need at this point around parenting children who do not live with you full-time?

## APPENDIX 4: PHASE 2 RECRUITMENT FLYERS

---

# WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT CHILD SUPPORT, CUSTODY, AND FATHERING?

If you are a father with at least one child that does not live with you full-time, we'd like to invite you to participate in a new peer-support program.

Eligible fathers will attend four online group sessions with other fathers, a post-course discussion, and complete a one-month follow-up survey. Participants are eligible to receive up to \$150 in compensation.



If you are interested in participating,  
please email:  
[focusonfathers@sohe.wisc.edu](mailto:focusonfathers@sohe.wisc.edu)





**WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT**

# **CHILD SUPPORT, CUSTODY, AND FATHERING?**



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