



# Three Innovative Approaches to Serving Low-Income Fathers

THE BUILDING BRIDGES AND BONDS STUDY

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*This brief introduces the Building Bridges and Bonds study (B3) to practitioners and stakeholders in the fatherhood field. It describes three innovative practices for Responsible Fatherhood programs. Each innovation is practical and interactive and addresses issues important to low-income fathers. The B3 team selected them for their high potential to provide useful lessons for the field. The team then collaborated with local fatherhood programs and program developers to tailor the innovations for B3. The brief is the first in a series of publications on B3, its findings, and the lessons learned.*

## *B3 seeks to identify services that can measurably improve the outcomes of fathers who participate in Responsible Fatherhood programs.*

A father's support — both financial and emotional — has been linked to better outcomes on nearly every measure of a child's well-being, from cognitive development and educational achievement to self-esteem and positive behaviors toward others.<sup>1</sup> However, many fathers, particularly low-income fathers, struggle to provide support. Personal and societal barriers get in the way, such as low levels of education, stigma from criminal records, declining wages for low-skilled men, or family instability. These challenges have led the field to search for innovative programming that supports men and their families.<sup>2</sup>

Local organizations across the United States are responding by implementing Responsible Fatherhood programs. Responsible Fatherhood programs aim to improve the well-being of fathers and their children by addressing the particular challenges they face. These programs often play an important role in communities, particularly low-income communities, giving fathers a place to reflect on their familial role and plan for better futures for themselves and their children. The federal government

supports these efforts through the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRP) initiative, a \$150 million discretionary grant program administered by Office of Family Assistance.<sup>3</sup> In 2015, OFA awarded five-year Responsible Fatherhood grants to 39 organizations, Healthy Marriage grants to 46 organizations, and an additional five awards to programs that serve incarcerated fathers and fathers reentering society. Qualifying fatherhood programs use a range of curricula and practices tailored to the needs of local participants to address three primary issues: responsible parenting, healthy marriage and co-parent relationships, and economic stability.

### What Is B3?

B3 is a partnership between six organizations that provide Responsible Fatherhood services, the MDRC-led study team, and the project funder, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF).<sup>4</sup> (See Figure 1.) B3 seeks to identify services that can

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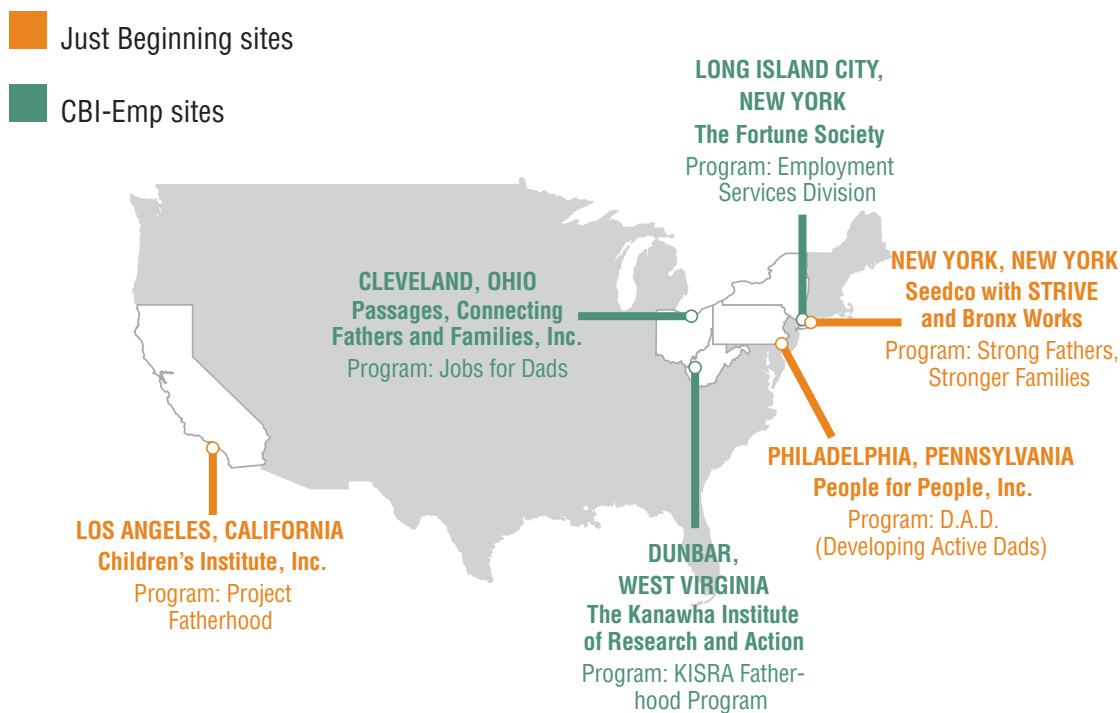
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**FIGURE 1**  
**B3 PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS AND RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS**



measurably improve the outcomes of fathers who participate in Responsible Fatherhood programs. The study is designed to rigorously assess new and emerging service approaches in the field over the next three years.<sup>5</sup>

In 2016, each of the six local programs participating in B3 added one or two program components or innovations to the usual services it offered. Practitioners will learn two main lessons from the study:

- 1 Whether any or all of the innovations have an impact on (or make a difference in) the lives of participating fathers and their children, greater than the standard services that programs offer
- 2 How programs engaged fathers and implemented the services, both the innovations and existing services for fathers

As the study progresses, the B3 team plans to provide practitioners with updated information about whether these approaches work, what fathers (and even mothers) are saying about them, and what strategies local programs are using to deliver them. The team hopes that B3 will contribute to the broader evidence-based research on services for fathers and provide actionable information about the three specific innovations tested.



## Innovation

# 1 A Cognitive Behavioral Workshop That Builds Skills for Employment Stability

*Many participants in Responsible Fatherhood programs have a criminal record.<sup>6</sup> Parole restrictions, social stigma, psychological or behavioral problems, and other obstacles associated with a criminal background can make it more challenging to land or hold down a job. Although a large number of men with criminal backgrounds eventually find work, it is often unstable or low-wage work. Responsible Fatherhood programs may be able to improve employment outcomes for such men by helping them address some of the psychological and behavioral problems that can inhibit finding or retaining higher-paying, stable employment.<sup>7</sup>*

## INNOVATION

MDRC collaborated with the University of Cincinnati Corrections Institute to develop the Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Justice Involved Indi-

viduals Seeking Employment (CBI-Emp). CBI-Emp builds on emerging evidence from two distinct approaches to serving participants with a criminal history: traditional job-readiness services and cognitive behavioral skill-building, which aims to help individuals recognize and modify patterns of thinking and actions that lead to less positive outcomes. This intervention combines elements of the two approaches, with the idea that together they might produce better outcomes for participants than either one on its own.

This new approach to employment services uses interactive learning techniques and incorporates cognitive behavioral techniques that research has shown to improve outcomes for men involved in the criminal justice system. CBI-Emp was designed for individuals with a criminal record who have difficulty keeping a stable job and avoiding





## *CBI-Emp builds on emerging evidence from two distinct approaches to serving participants with a criminal history: traditional job-readiness services and cognitive behavioral skill-building.*

criminal activity. The goal is to help them recognize challenging situations, develop strategies to resolve problems when they arise in the workplace, and ensure success on the job.

### Program Approach

CBI-Emp is a series of structured 60- to 90-minute workshop sessions. The sessions feature group activities such as role-playing and collaborative problem solving that give participants an opportunity to develop interpersonal skills for the workplace. An ideal group size is 10 or fewer participants per facilitator, which allows all participants to personalize activities according to their own thoughts, experiences, and goals.

The activities help individuals understand their own thinking processes and learn positive ways to relate to others and appropriately manage challenging professional situations and relationships. In addition to improving workplace relationships, it is possible that these skills may spill over to men's relationships with other people, such as children or co-parents.

The curriculum covers five broad topics: motivational engagement, cognitive restructuring, emotion regulation and social skills, problem solving, and success planning. (See Box 1.) All staff members who deliver the intervention receive a two-staged training from the University of Cincinnati Corrections Institute. The first stage is a two-day training in which staff members learn the core skills needed to apply a cognitive behavioral approach to service

delivery. The second stage is a three-day training in which they learn each session's curriculum through demonstrations and interactive role-playing.

For B3, each local partner organization integrated at least 20 unique CBI-Emp sessions into its usual Responsible Fatherhood employment services. Some organizations offered optional supplemental sessions tailored to the individual participant.

### Potential Learning Opportunities

Before launching B3, in the fall of 2015 and the winter of 2016, MDRC conducted early pilot testing of CBI-Emp. The findings showed that adding CBI-Emp workshops can improve participants' overall attendance and engagement in other program services.<sup>8</sup>

The B3 study includes an analysis of how the intervention was implemented, whether and how fathers were engaged, and an impact analysis to find out if CBI-Emp led to improved outcomes.

- **What does it take to implement CBI-Emp?** The B3 team will interview program staff to look at (1) how organizations integrate CBI-Emp into existing Responsible Fatherhood services, and (2) the specific cognitive behavioral techniques that staff members use in their daily work with participants.
- **What do fathers think about the intervention?** The B3 team will analyze programmatic

## BOX 1

### CBI-EMP TOPICS

**MODULE 1:** Motivational Engagement sets the stage for learning. Participants define group expectations and reflect on their personal values and goals.

**MODULE 2:** Cognitive Restructuring introduces a technique called the behavior chain. Participants practice recognizing difficult situations and how they influence their emotions and behaviors. They then practice how to think the thoughts and take more control over the actions that can produce better outcomes.

**MODULE 3:** Emotion Regulation and Social Skills teaches self-control strategies. Participants observe a demonstration, which uses these skills

in challenging situations that might arise in the workplace. They then role-play using a situation from their own experiences and receive feedback.

**MODULE 4:** Problem Solving advances participants to more complex situations by walking them through three key problem-solving steps: identifying the problem and goal, brainstorming options, and planning and trying a solution.

**MODULE 5:** Success Planning brings it all together. Participants develop individualized plans to achieve and maintain employment success. They present their plans to the facilitator and their peers.

data and conduct focus groups with fathers to learn more about their engagement in the workshops. In particular, the team will ask about how they are applying the skills they are learning to better manage personal and professional relationships.

- **How does CBI-Emp affect fathers' employment or parenting practices?** The B3 team will compare fathers who had and did not have access to the workshops to learn if the intervention leads to any of the following:

- Better employment outcomes and higher earnings
- Reduced involvement in the criminal justice system
- Increased financial and emotional support for their children
- Improved coping, interpersonal, and problem-solving skills

## An Interactive Approach to High-Quality Parenting

*Research shows that there is a strong link between supportive fathering and child outcomes, and that a lack of father involvement can pose developmental risks for children.<sup>9</sup> Responsible Fatherhood service providers and others in the field are highly interested in identifying strategies that support fathers in building emotionally and financially supportive relationships with their children from their youngest ages. Just Beginning represents one such new strategy. This curriculum builds father-child relationships by bringing together fathers and their children, ages two months to three years, and engaging them in play.*

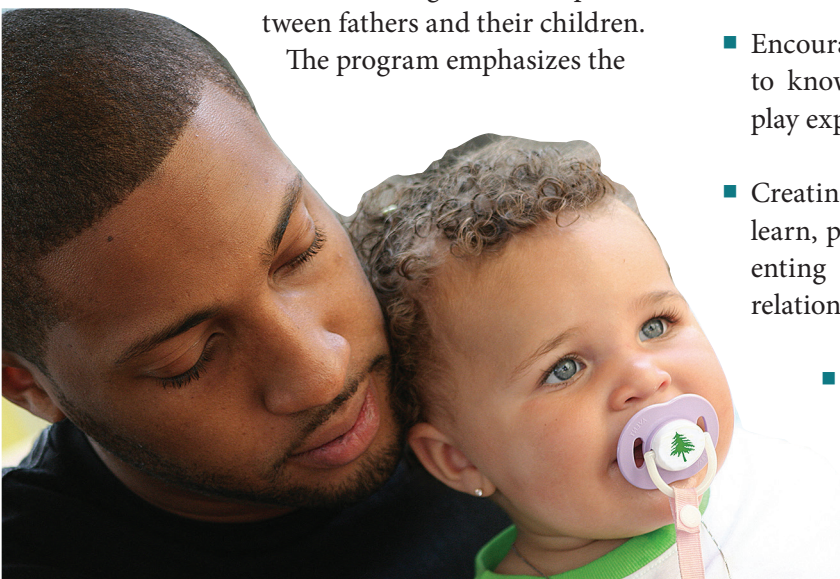
### INNOVATION

MDRC collaborated with psychologist Rachel Barr at Georgetown University and Carole Shauffer, a lawyer and director of the Youth Law Center, to adapt Just Beginning for B3. The cornerstone of the intervention is its focus on building strong, positive, and enduring relationships between fathers and their children.

The program emphasizes the

importance of parent-child bonding that occurs through play, which is the “work” of young children. Just Beginning was first implemented as a structured visitation program for incarcerated teenage fathers. For B3, the model was adapted for a community-based setting. The program enrolls fathers with children ages two months to three years with the following three goals:

- Encouraging fathers and their children to get to know each other better through shared play experiences
- Creating an environment for fathers to learn, practice, and receive feedback on parenting approaches that promote positive relationships
- Providing fathers with opportunities to experience success in engaging their children



## BOX 2

### JUST BEGINNING SESSION CONCEPTS



#### SESSION 1: NOTICE

Fathers learn about the importance of noticing the child's actions and emotional cues. By watching and paying attention to his child's needs, he is getting to know his child and setting the stage for building a stronger relationship.

#### SESSION 2: FOLLOW

Fathers learn how to follow the child's lead, offer choices, and explore the things in which the child is interested. By paying attention to the child's interests and joining the child in play, he is giving the child a sense of having an effect on the child's world.

#### SESSION 3: TALK

Fathers learn how to talk to the child using "parentese" (slow-paced, exaggerated tone) and label things

in the environment. By describing things as the child interacts with them, he is helping the child make connections between objects and words.

#### SESSION 4: ENCOURAGE

Fathers learn how to encourage and praise the child. By giving the child specific positive feedback, he is creating a learning environment in which the child can grow, feel safe and loved, and learn about his expectations.

#### SESSION 5: "IT'S A WRAP!"

Fathers learn how to tie it all together, integrating all the strategies from prior lessons.

## Program Approach

Just Beginning comprises five one-on-one sessions that are scheduled approximately once per week. (See Box 2.) Each session lasts for 60 to 90 minutes and consists of three components:

### 1. PARENT LEARNING SESSION

- A trained and certified facilitator introduces the father to a fundamental but simple concept that may help him to improve the quality of his interactions with his young child.
- The father watches a short collection of Sesame Beginnings video clips featuring Baby Elmo and other characters that illustrate

these concepts and lay the groundwork for the father-child play session.

- The father and facilitator discuss the video and plan for the father-child play session.

### 2. FATHER-CHILD PLAY SESSION

- The father joins his young child in a child-friendly play space, which is safe for the child to explore and contains a colorful floor-mat, books, toys, and other items that facilitate father-child interactions.
- The father has an opportunity to try out the new approaches he has just learned as he plays with his child.



*The cornerstone of Just Beginning is its focus on building strong, positive, and enduring relationships between fathers and their children.*

- The facilitator simply observes the interaction and does not interfere with it or judge the father.

### 3. DEBRIEF SESSION

- The facilitator describes positive examples of how the father used any new approaches with his child.
- The father and facilitator reflect on the play session together.
- The father and facilitator jointly brainstorm ideas for how the father will apply the lesson he learned to other settings.

## Potential Learning Opportunities

The B3 team selected Just Beginning for the study because of the following program features: (1) it was designed specifically for fathers, (2) it focuses on providing fathers with high-quality experiential learning and immediate positive feedback on their interactions with their children, and (3) early field tests showed that it improved the quality of fathers' interactions with their young children over time.<sup>10</sup>

B3 includes an analysis of how Just Beginning was implemented, whether and how fathers were engaged, and an impact analysis to find out if Just Beginning led to improved outcomes.

- **What does it take to implement Just Beginning?** The B3 team will learn about how services were implemented, participation patterns of fathers and children, what types of effort encouraged parents to participate, and the training and support needed to implement the program.
- **What do fathers think about the intervention?** The B3 team will interview program staff and parents about their experiences and use programmatic data to learn about what is needed to successfully implement Just Beginning within a Responsible Fatherhood program and how to overcome potential challenges.
- **How does Just Beginning affect fathers' parenting practices?** The B3 study will compare fathers who had and did not have access to Just Beginning sessions to learn if the intervention leads to any of the following:
  - Improved father-child relationship quality
  - An increase in father-child contact
  - Enhanced parenting confidence
  - An increase in fathers' use of warm and supportive parenting behaviors and engagement in developmentally appropriate activities with their children

# Innovation

## 3 An Engagement and Retention Approach

*For fathers who are juggling child care responsibilities and holding down a job or looking for work, it may be difficult to attend the Just Beginning sessions consistently even if they intend to do so. Prior studies of Responsible Fatherhood programs have found that retaining men in services over several weeks or months may be challenging; Just Beginning may pose unique hurdles because it requires that the father and child attend sessions together.<sup>11</sup> In response, the B3 team has sought creative solutions to boosting fathers' engagement by using the kinds of behavioral science insights that research has found to help people follow through on their intentions in a variety of other contexts.*

### INNOVATION

The B3 team, in partnership with external content and platform development teams, created DadTime. DadTime is a smartphone-based mobile application that provides a father with automated program attendance reminders and interactive tools to help him apply what he has learned in Just Beginning sessions to subsequent interactions with his child.

DadTime uses mobile technology to provide:

#### 1. PROGRAM ATTENDANCE PLANNING TOOLS

- DadTime sends an automated reminder one day before a scheduled Just Beginning session. It includes the time and location of the session and gives the father an opportunity to plan for his transportation and travel time.

- An option allows the father to send an automated text message reminder to the person accompanying the child to the session, if he is not bringing the child himself.



*DadTime provides a father with automated program attendance reminders and interactive tools to help him apply what he has learned in Just Beginning sessions to interactions with his child.*

- Another option allows the father to instantly notify program staff if he needs to reschedule.

## 2. CONTENT SUPPORT

- DadTime sends the father exercises and activity suggestions after each Just Beginning session, to help him reflect on what he has learned and plan for time he may spend with his child between sessions.
- Several weeks after enrolling in the program, the father begins to receive biweekly prompts that encourage him to plan for continued playtime with his child, as well as reinforce key program concepts.

## Program Approach

DadTime's attendance planning tools and content support messages both draw directly on evidence about the importance of reminders, personalized information, and prompts to action in helping people follow through on their intentions.<sup>12</sup> (See Figure 2 for examples of messages to fathers from DadTime.)

- **Personalization:** DadTime customizes content for each father based on his child's age and gender and the frequency with which he sees his child.
- **Reminders:** The mobile application allows each father to set the time at which he would like to receive a reminder; it will send a push notification to his phone at the scheduled time.

- **Simplification:** DadTime collects and summarizes program concepts into bite-sized informational takeaways.

- **Planning tools:** Before each session, DadTime guides the father through a transportation plan to the program site, including directions and a suggested departure time.

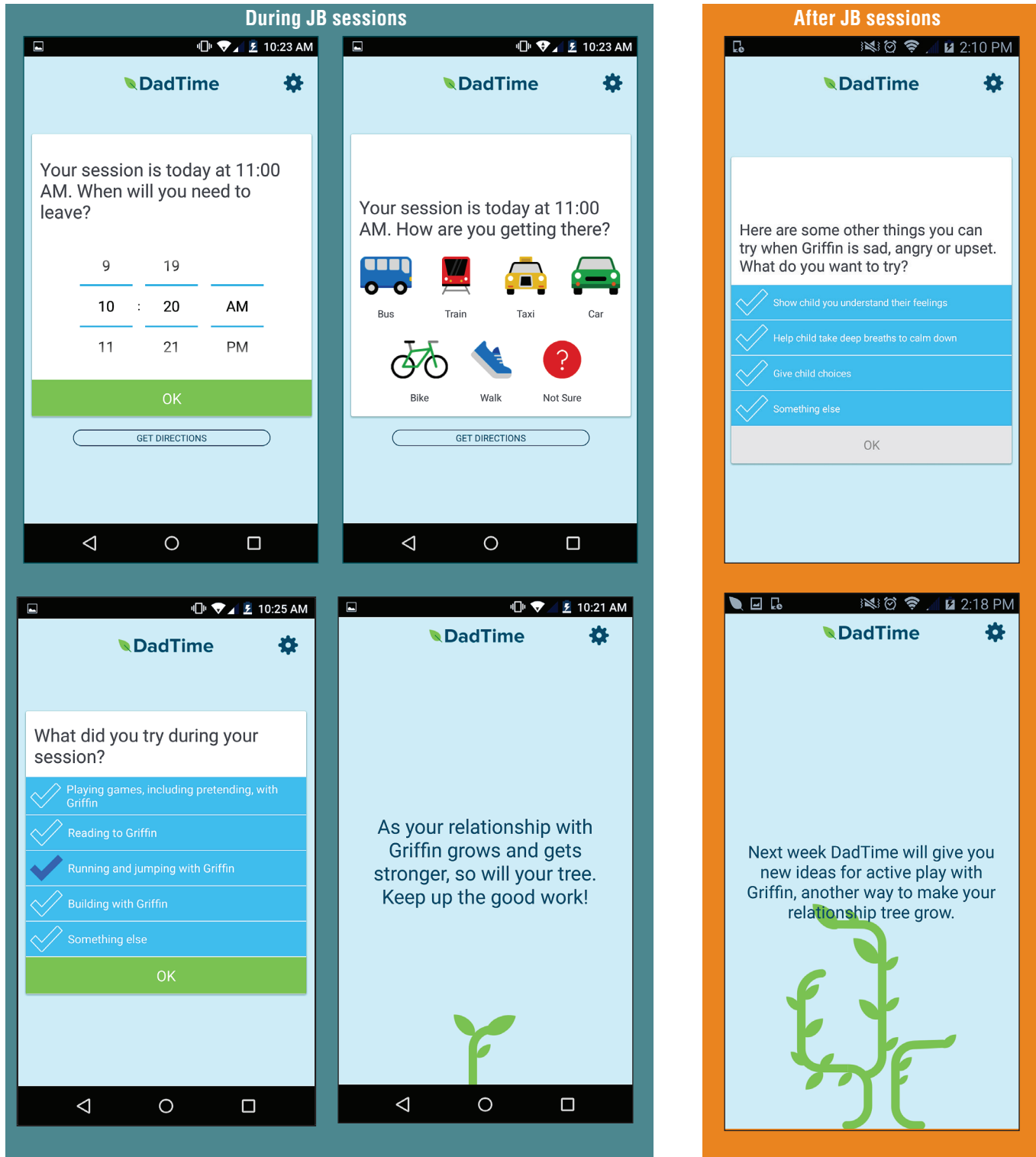
- **Addressing barriers for those who do not attend:** When a father misses a session, DadTime will ask him about the specific barriers that interfered with his attendance and walk him through plan-making and goal-setting exercises.

## Potential Learning Opportunities

The B3 team created DadTime based on the idea that helping fathers to plan for their attendance and for how they will spend time with their child *between* sessions would boost program engagement. It represents exploratory research and the B3 team hopes to learn:

- **What does it take to implement mobile technology designed to support fatherhood programming?** The application could potentially replace some of the program staff's routine tasks (for example, placing reminder phone calls in advance of a session), and the B3 team will assess whether it in fact lessened their workloads. The study also offers an opportunity to explore the logistics of implementing such a mobile application.

**FIGURE 2**  
**EXAMPLES OF MESSAGES FROM DADTIME**





- **What do fathers think about the intervention?** The B3 team will interview program staff and fathers about their experience using DadTime.
- **To what extent does the mobile application show promise in increasing program engagement?** The study team will explore whether DadTime may improve participation and whether fathers and staff find it to be a helpful supplement to the regular program activities.

## Endnotes

- 1 For example, see Paul R. Amato and Joan G. Gilbreth, “Nonresident Fathers and Children’s Well-Being: A Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 61, 3: 557-573 (1999); Natasha J. Cabrera, Jacqueline D. Shannon, and Catherine Tamis-LeMonda, “Fathers’ Influence on Their Children’s Cognitive and Emotional Development: From Toddlers to Pre-K,” *Applied Developmental Science* 11, 4: 208-213 (2007); Maria Cancian, Kristen Shook Slack, and Mi Youn Yang, “The Effect of Family Income on Risk of Child Maltreatment” (Institute for Research on Poverty Discussion Paper 1385-10) (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, Institute for Research on Poverty, 2010); Marcia J. Carlson and Katherine Magnuson, “Low-Income Fathers’ Influence on Children,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 635, 1: 95-116 (2011); Carolyn P. Cowan, Philip A. Cowan, Nancy Cohen, Marsha K. Pruett, and Kyle Pruett, “Supporting Fathers’ Engagement with Their Kids,” pages 44-80 in Jill Duerr Berrick and Neil Gilbert (eds.), *Raising Children: Emerging Needs, Modern Risks, and Social Responses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Valerie King and Juliana M. Sobolewski, “Nonresident Fathers’ Contributions to Adolescent Well-Being,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68, 3: 537-557 (2006).
- 2 Joseph Broadus, Sara Muller-Ravett, Arielle Sherman, and Cindy Redcross, *A Successful Prisoner Reentry Program Expands: Lessons from the Replication of the Center for Employment Opportunities* (New York: MDRC, 2016).
- 3 The Office of Family Assistance is an office of the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the HMRF discretionary grant program, see Office of Family Assistance, “About Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood,” website: [www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/healthy-marriage/about](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/healthy-marriage/about); Office of Family Assistance, “Responsible Fatherhood,” website: [www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/healthy-marriage/responsible-fatherhood](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/ofa/programs/healthy-marriage/responsible-fatherhood).
- 4 With funding from ACF’s Office of Family Assistance, ACF’s Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation contracted MDRC and its research partners MEF Associates and Abt SRBI. Georgetown University, Youth Law Center, and the University of Cincinnati’s

## Implications of the B3 Study

The service innovations described in this brief represent new and potentially effective options for Responsible Fatherhood programs. Each innovation is highly interactive and aims to build specific skills that can help fathers make noticeable progress in their lives. The B3 team selected these innovations after lengthy discussions with practitioners, policymakers, and other experts in the field, as well as after site visits to programs across the country.

The B3 team will publish reports and additional briefs to update Responsible Fatherhood program administrators, practitioners, advocates, funders, and others in the field on the lessons learned about these approaches during the study. These publications will share the perspectives of program staff and managers on integrating these innovations into their existing services and of fathers who graciously agreed to participate. They will also present the results of an impact study designed to assess whether these new program strategies improve the lives of fathers and their children.

- Corrections Institute also provide technical assistance. The Fortune Society provides Responsible Fatherhood services, but does not currently receive funding from the federal HMRF grant program.
- 5 The B3 study began enrolling fathers and implementing the new program components starting in the Fall of 2016. The study team expects to release early findings from the process study in 2018 and results of an impact study in 2019.
  - 6 Heather Zaveri, Scott Baumgartner, Robin Dion, and Liz Clary, *Parents and Children Together: Design and Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs* (Washington DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, 2015).
  - 7 Edward Latessa, “Why Work Is Important, and How to Improve the Effectiveness of Correctional Reentry Programs that Target Employment,” *Criminology and Public Policy* 11, 1: 87-91 (2012).
  - 8 Mifta Chowdhury, Sara Muller-Ravett, and Bret Barden, “Cognitive Behavioral Employment Pilot: Final Report” (unpublished paper) (New York: MDRC, 2016).
  - 9 For example, see Amato and Gilbreth (1999); Cancian, Shook Slack, and Yang (2010); Cabrera, Shannon, and Tamis-LeMonda (2007); King and Sobolewski (2006); Cowan et al. (2008); and Carlson and Magnuson (2011).
  - 10 Rachel Barr, Marisa Morin, Natalie H. Brito, Benjamin Richeda, Jennifer Rodriguez, and Carole Shauffer, “Delivering Services to Incarcerated Teen Fathers: A Pilot Intervention to Increase the Quality of Father-Infant Interactions During Visitation,” *Psychological Services* 11, 7: 10-21 (2014).
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  - 12 Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Caitlin Anzelone, and Nadine Dechausay with Patrick Landers, *Nudging Change in Human Services: Final Report of the Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) Project*, OPRE Report 2017-23 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

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