

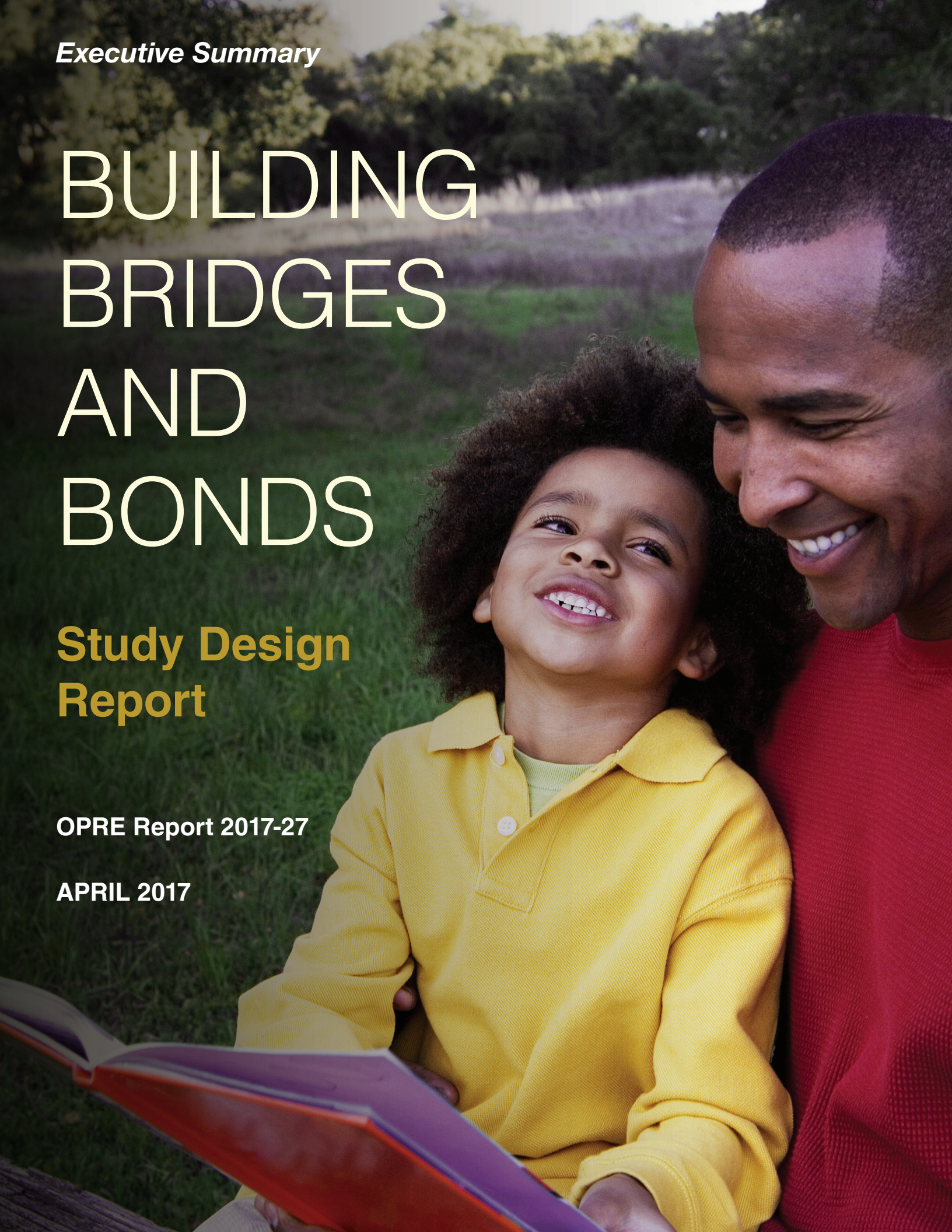
*Executive Summary*

# BUILDING BRIDGES AND BONDS

**Study Design  
Report**

OPRE Report 2017-27

APRIL 2017



# Building Bridges and Bonds | STUDY DESIGN REPORT

OPRE REPORT 2017-27

APRIL 2017

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# Overview

## Introduction

This report describes the Building Bridges and Bonds study, a rigorous evaluation of new program approaches to support low-income fathers in working toward economic stability and improved relationships with their children. The report includes a description of the three new program approaches being added to responsible fatherhood program services and the research design that is being used to evaluate them.

The new program components being evaluated in the study are:

- the **Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Justice Involved Individuals Seeking Employment**, which works with fathers with recent involvement in the criminal justice system and aims to help them find and keep better jobs by improving coping skills and encouraging positive thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors;
- the **Just Beginning parenting intervention**, a program that works with fathers and their young children together to improve the quality of father-child interactions; and
- the **DadTime engagement intervention**, a smartphone app that aims to improve fathers' participation in the program by guiding and supporting them in making and following through on plans for attending Just Beginning workshops. It also prompts them to practice skills learned in the parenting intervention.

The evaluation includes a process study and an impact study.

- The process study will describe who participated in services, how services operated, and the challenges staff faced. It will provide lessons for the field on key elements for successful program implementation and barriers to overcome when adding these new program components.
- The impacts of each of the three innovative program components will be rigorously evaluated using an experimental research design. The impact study will address questions about whether the new approaches affect key outcomes of interest, including employment, father-child relationship quality, and program participation.

In all, the Building Bridges and Bonds study is expected to enroll around 2,200 fathers across six fatherhood program sites. The study began enrolling fathers and implementing the new program components in the fall of 2016. The study team plans to release initial findings from the process study in 2018 and impact findings in 2019.

## Primary Research Question

- 1 What were the key elements needed to support implementation of the added program component(s) in each program site?
- 2 What were the impacts of the added program components on outcomes of interest, such as employment, earnings, and the quality of the father-child relationship?
- 3 What was the impact of the DadTime intervention on program participation rates?

## Purpose

Over recent decades, changes in labor markets and in family structure have created substantial barriers for fathers in maintaining stable employment and stable relationships with their children. These challenges are particularly pressing given that fathers' financial and emotional support for their children provides a critical foundation for child well-being. 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.

There is great interest in identifying effective strategies that build fathers' capacity to support their children both emotionally and financially. Responsible fatherhood programs use a number of promising models to work with fathers, but prior evaluations of fatherhood interventions have found limited impacts. The Building Bridges and Bonds study is designed to test innovative, evidence-informed programming for fathers, with the goal of building practical evidence that can be used to improve services for low-income fathers. This report describes these new approaches and the research design of the study.

## Methods

The Building Bridges and Bonds study includes both a mixed-methods process study and a rigorous impact study. The process study collects qualitative and quantitative data from program staff delivering the usual fatherhood services and new program components, from fathers participating in the study, and from co-parents. Together, these data sources address fundamental questions about what it took to implement the new program components and about the experiences of staff, fathers, and co-parents with the new program components.

The impact study is an experimental evaluation with a six-month follow up. Half of the fathers are randomly assigned to a group offered the new program component in addition to the usual services, and the other half are assigned to a control group offered only the usual services. The difference in outcomes between the randomly assigned groups represents the impact of the new program components. The impact study addresses the central question of what effects the added components have on fathers' parenting, economic stability, and program participation.

# Acknowledgments



The design of the Building Bridges and Bonds study described in this report was informed by the advice and input of many thoughtful reviewers and consultants.

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The study team has also consulted with additional academic experts and received excellent suggestions on our research design and survey instruments from Kathryn Edin of Johns Hopkins University, Jay Fagan of Temple University, Paul Florsheim of University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Richard Guare of the Center for Learning and Attention Disorders in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and Cynthia Osborne of the University of Texas-Austin. Linda Collins of Pennsylvania State University provided valuable input on the initial research design of the study, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn and Marisa Morin of Columbia University provided expert guidance on the design of the video observation component of the study.

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Emily Brennan at MDRC provided excellent research assistance, and led all aspects of producing the report.

Christopher Boland edited the report, and Carolyn Thomas designed and prepared it for production.

# Executive Summary

Recognizing the challenges that low-income fathers often face in maintaining stable employment and stable relationships with their children, the Office of Planning Research and Evaluation, with support from the Office of Family Assistance, funded the Building Bridges and Bonds (B3) study to rigorously test innovative program approaches to support low-income fathers in working toward economic stability and improved relationships with their children. MDRC is partnering with MEF Associates, Abt SRBI, and Mathematica Policy Research to conduct this study. This report describes the three new program approaches that the B3 study is evaluating as well as the B3 study's research design.

Since the 1990s, the federal and state governments have funded “Responsible Fatherhood” programs aimed at encouraging fathers’ involvement with their children, strengthening two-parent families, and increasing fathers’ economic stability. Five of the six fatherhood program sites where the B3 study is being conducted are current recipients of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grants funded by the federal Office of Family Assistance.

The B3 study design adds new program components to the usual services offered by existing Responsible Fatherhood programs, and rigorously estimates the impacts of each added component. The following three new and innovative program components are being implemented and evaluated across six Responsible Fatherhood program sites<sup>1</sup>:

- 1** The **Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Justice Involved Individuals Seeking Employment (CBI-Emp)**. The CBI-Emp intervention is designed to improve economic stability by encouraging positive thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors among individuals recently involved with the criminal justice system. The CBI-Emp approach addresses challenges associated with deficits in executive functioning by building skills in impulse control, problem solving, organization, and time management. The B3 study team will conduct an evaluation of this added component in the following three Responsible Fatherhood program sites that focus on serving fathers who were recently involved with the criminal system:

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**1** 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) (2016); 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) (2016).

- Kanawha Institute for Social Research and Action, Inc. (KISRA), in Dunbar and Beckley, West Virginia
  - Ohio Department of Job and Family Services' Passages Connecting Fathers and Families, Inc., in Cleveland, Ohio
  - The Fortune Society in New York, New York
- 2 The **Just Beginning (JB)** parenting intervention. The JB intervention works with fathers and children together to improve the quality of fathers' interactions with their young children. This program component will be added and evaluated in the following three Responsible Fatherhood program sites:
- Children's Institute, Inc., in Los Angeles, California
  - People for People, Inc., in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
  - Structured Employment Economic Development Corporation (Seedco) in New York, New York
- 3 The **DadTime** engagement intervention. DadTime is a smartphone app that guides and supports fathers in making and completing plans for attending JB sessions, and provides other digital content to encourage program participation. This intervention will be implemented and evaluated in the three JB sites. Fathers assigned to the JB program group who have smartphones at the time of intake will comprise this intervention's research sample.

The B3 study team will rigorously test each of the three added program components using an experimental research design in which participating fathers are randomly assigned either to a group offered the new program component or to a "services as usual" group that is not offered this new component. In all, the study is expected to enroll around 2,200 fathers:

- The CBI-Emp study will include around 1,100 fathers who were previously involved with the criminal justice system.
- The JB study will include 1,100 fathers with children between 2 months and under 3 years of age.
- DadTime will include up to 400 to 500 fathers, who have smartphones at the time of intake and are offered the JB program component. These same fathers are also included in the JB study program group.

Because prior evaluations of fatherhood interventions have found only weak and limited impacts, there is a pressing need for rigorous evaluations of innovative approaches to promoting economic stability and

strong father-child relationships.<sup>2</sup> Through the DadTime engagement intervention, the B3 study also seeks to address a fundamental programmatic challenge: sustaining fathers' participation in and engagement with program services.

The B3 study includes a process study and an impact study. The process study will provide lessons for the field on key elements for successful program implementation as well as barriers to be overcome when adding these new program components. The impact study is designed to provide rigorous evidence of what impacts these new program components achieve over a six-month follow-up period when they are added to existing Responsible Fatherhood services. In line with these broad objectives, the B3 study will address the following overarching research questions:

- 1 How were the new program components implemented at each program site? What key elements were needed to support implementation of the added program components? What implementation challenges were encountered?
- 2 What effects did the added CBI-Emp and JB program components have on outcomes of interest, such as employment and earnings and the quality of the father-child relationship?
- 3 What were the standard approaches used to encourage fathers' participation in program services, and what participation rates did they achieve? Compared with these standard approaches on their own, what added effect did the DadTime engagement intervention have on program participation rates?

To answer these questions, the B3 process and impact studies will draw on a variety of data sources. The process study will use data from surveys administered to staff and to fathers, from in-depth interviews with staff, and from focus groups with fathers and with co-parents. The process study will also draw on direct observations of service delivery, document review, DadTime app usage data, and participation data from management information systems used by each local program. The impact study will draw on data from surveys administered at baseline and after six months of follow-up and administrative records on employment and earnings and criminal justice outcomes.

## **The Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Justice Involved Individuals Seeking Employment (CBI-Emp): A Promising Approach to Encourage Employment Stability**

Many fathers served by Responsible Fatherhood programs have had some involvement with the criminal justice system and some programs expressly serve fathers with a criminal history. Individuals returning

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Avellar, M. Robin Dion, Andrew Clarkwest, Heather Zaveri, Subuhi Asheer, Kelley Borradaile, Megan Hague Angus, Timothy Novak, Julie Redline, and Marykate Zukiewicz, *Catalog of Research: Programs for Low-Income Fathers*, OPRE Report No. 2011-20 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

from a period of incarceration face a number of well-documented challenges, including the need for a job and steady income, stable housing, and reestablishing healthy relationships with family and friends. An approach integrating cognitive behavioral and job-readiness services may be a promising direction for improving outcomes for these highly disadvantaged men.

The CBI-Emp program component aims to encourage positive attitudes and behaviors; build interpersonal, problem-solving, and coping skills; and increase employment stability. The University of Cincinnati's Corrections Institute, in collaboration with MDRC, developed the CBI-Emp curriculum. The CBI-Emp program component comprises two core elements: (1) a cognitive behavioral, job-readiness curriculum for fathers covering topics such as recognizing and changing thoughts that can lead to risky behaviors, learning self-control and problem-solving skills, and developing a plan for success at work; and (2) staff training in a curriculum known as "core correctional practices," which imparts the essential skills needed to deliver the cognitive behavioral programming and to apply cognitive behavioral principles across all types of service delivery.

The theory of change for a cognitive behavioral approach is that the intervention will improve how the father assesses the rewards and costs of criminal behavior, encourage positive attitudes and behaviors, and build problem-solving and coping skills, which could then improve the father's ability to find and retain employment. To be eligible for the CBI-Emp program component, a father must be at least 18 years of age, have been involved with the criminal justice system within the past three years, and score at a moderate to high risk of recidivism on a risk assessment.

## Just Beginning (JB): Working with Fathers and Young Children Together to Improve Father-Child Relationships

The JB program uses short, instructional parenting videos, and serves fathers and their young children together over the course of five sessions to enhance the quality of the father-child relationship. Although parenting programs for mothers have often worked with mothers and young children together (for example, home visiting programs), parenting programs for fathers do not typically incorporate young children in program services. The JB program, therefore, represents a new and novel component for most Responsible Fatherhood programs. Each of the five JB program sessions consists of the following three components:

- 1 A father-facilitator one-on-one parent training session, which includes the viewing of a short video featuring some simple parenting approaches, such as following the child's lead and praising the child, that fathers can use to improve the quality of their interactions with their young child
- 2 A father-child play session in which fathers apply the parenting approaches just presented
- 3 A father-facilitator debrief session in which fathers reflect on how the play session went and receive feedback and encouragement from the facilitator

The JB component is designed to have positive impacts on the quality of the father-child relationship over a short-term, six-month follow-up period. Fathers with a child between 2 months and under 3 years of age are the target group for the JB program. Fathers also need to have seen their child at least once in the past 30 days to be eligible for the component and have no reasons (legal or otherwise) that prevent the father from participating with his child.

A fundamental question is whether fatherhood programs can successfully implement an intervention that requires fathers to attend with their child. A substantial proportion of the fathers served by Responsible Fatherhood programs do not live with their child and some may have contentious relationships with their child's mother or guardian. For nonresident fathers, the JB program will require the cooperation of the child's mother or guardian, which represents an important implementation challenge.

## DadTime: A Smartphone Intervention to Encourage Program Participation

The DadTime smartphone app is an enhancement to the JB program. While participation in JB does not require a smartphone, DadTime will be offered to fathers who have smartphones at intake and are assigned to the JB program group.

Using a sequential random assignment research design, the study will assess whether DadTime increases JB participation rates. The DadTime engagement study randomly assigns half of the fathers in the JB program group to a “full DadTime” group that receives an engagement intervention via the DadTime app *during* their participation in JB. This group of fathers will experience the following three main points of contact during the JB session period:

- 1 Reminders and planning support the *day before* a session to set an attendance goal and help fathers arrive on time to program sessions
- 2 Check-ins and logs the *day after* a session, to promote reflection on the perceived value of the session content
- 3 Suggestions and reminder prompts for father-child activities *during the weekend*, when they are likely to see their children, to practice the content and skills learned in the sessions

The other half of the fathers in the JB program group will be randomly assigned to the “partial DadTime” group. Fathers in the partial DadTime group will receive no app-driven reminders or reinforcements during their period of participation in JB sessions, but will receive skill reinforcement from the app after participation ends.

The theory of change driving the test is that helping fathers *between sessions* to plan for their attendance and for how they will spend time with their child will boost program engagement. The B3 study aims to create an intervention in which the father is the driving force, enlisting and enhancing his organizational

and planning skills. A fundamental question that the B3 study addresses is whether using a smartphone app can affect participation in a parenting intervention that involves a father and child attending together.

## **The Process Study: Understanding What It Takes to Implement New Program Approaches**

The B3 study tests a set of new program approaches that have not been widely implemented or evaluated in a Responsible Fatherhood program context. The process study will describe how each new program component was embedded in existing program services, what it took to establish and maintain the component, and how it operated over the course of the study period. The process study will also compare and contrast the services received by fathers assigned to the new program component group with those received by fathers assigned to the services as usual group, as the basis for interpreting the impact findings. The study will highlight lessons for the field, including what it takes to engage fathers, the challenges sites face in implementing new program components, and the fathers' own experiences and perspectives on the new program approaches.

The process study relies on a mixed-methods methodology, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches, and combines data from a variety of sources. The study team is collecting data on perspectives of both staff and fathers to better understand key implementation issues.

## **The Impact Study: The Difference That New Program Approaches Make in Fathers' Lives**

A rigorous experimental research design will be used to evaluate the impacts of the new program components — CBI-Emp, JB, and DadTime. In each of the tests of these new program components, fathers will be randomly assigned to one of two research groups: a new program component group, which is offered the new program component in addition to any usual program services, or the services as usual control group, which is offered only the usual program services. The impact study will compare the outcomes of fathers in the new component program group with outcomes for fathers in a services as usual group. The difference in outcomes between these two research groups represent the “impacts,” or the difference the new program component makes in the lives of the fathers it serves.

## **Looking Ahead**

The B3 study began enrolling fathers and implementing the new program components starting in the fall of 2016. The research team expects to release early findings from the process study in 2018. Findings from the CBI-Emp, JB, and DadTime interventions are expected to be released in 2019.