TRY, REFLECT, TRY AGAIN

How Fatherhood Programs Used Learning Cycles in Efforts to Improve Participation Outcomes

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Introduction

Social service programs are often looking for ways to assess and improve program design and implementation, and are increasingly using rapid learning methods to do so. In rapid learning cycles, programs try a new approach, see how well it works, make modifications to strengthen it, and then try it again.[1] This brief illustrates how 10 fatherhood programs used learning cycles to evaluate one of three promising approaches to engaging men in their services, and the ways they used data in the learning cycle process to make decisions about the design and implementation of the approaches. Even outside of the learning cycle framework, programs may benefit from using data and the observations and reflections of participants and staff members to guide the implementation of program elements, as is illustrated in this piece.

The learning cycles discussed in this brief were part of the Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF) project. SIRF used learning cycles to test three approaches to improving enrollment and participation in fatherhood programs, which seek to support strong parenting, relationships, and economic

The SIRF Approaches

Each SIRF program tested one of three broad approaches to improving fathers' enrollment, engagement, and retention in services:

- Enhanced **outreach** to potential program participants

- Alumni **mentoring**

- **Coaching** techniques used in lieu of traditional case management

The SIRF team identified these approaches in partnership with experts in the field, as well as with the participating programs.

stability.[2] SIRF was conducted by MDRC and its partners MEF Associates and Insight Policy Research (now known as Westat Insight) under contract to the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The SIRF Learning Cycles: Learn-Do-Reflect
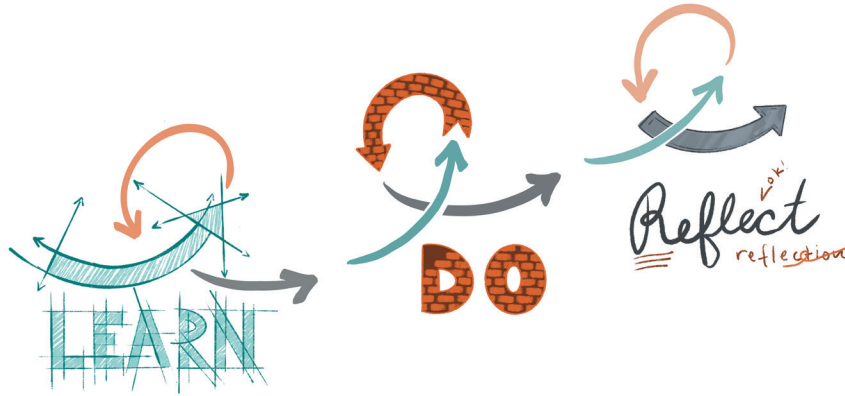
In SIRF, each learning cycle had three phases: "Learn," "Do," and "Reflect."[3] The elements of the three phases are:

LEARN: Train and prepare to implement

- Identify the necessary tools, information, and resources to implement the approach
- Train program staff members
- Communicate plans for upcoming cycle

DO: Implement the new approach

- Implement the planned approach
- Collect the reactions and observations of participants and staff members regularly
- Monitor major components of the approach to see to what extent it was implemented as planned

REFLECT: Assess data and the reactions of participants and staff members and develop a plan for the next cycle

- Compile and review program data and the reactions and observations of participants and staff members for the entire cycle
- Convene staff members to discuss the successes and challenges of previous cycle
- Solidify implementation plans for the next cycle, taking into account the data and reactions described above

Both the "Do" and "Reflect" phases in SIRF focused on using data to assess progress and make decisions. The "Do" phase lasted two to four months, during which the

SIRF team (made up of MDRC, MEF, and Insight Policy Research staff members) and program staff members regularly reviewed data that showed whether the approach was being implemented as planned. During the "Reflect" phase—which typically lasted for approximately two weeks—programs looked more carefully at what had been implemented during the cycle, as well as what program participants and staff members thought about it. This information was part of a structured review that helped programs decide what to do in the next cycle.

"Reflect" Data Sources

- **"SIRFboard."** The SIRFboard was a simple management tool that the SIRF team custom-designed in Excel for each program, to collect data on approach implementation. Program staff members updated data in the SIRFboard throughout the cycle, populating embedded graphs and charts.

- **nFORM.** nFORM (Information, Family Outcomes, Reporting, and Management) is the federal management information system that all participating programs used to track program enrollment and participation. The SIRF team drew data from this system to create participation "funnels," showing how participation changed at each step in the process.

- **Father reflection forms.** Programs solicited the responses of every participating father by sending a link by text message or email at one or two important program moments for each incoming group of fathers.

- **Staff and mentor reflection forms.** The SIRF team asked selected program staff members at every program to complete a short form once per cycle to record their observations. In the programs testing peer mentoring approaches, the mentors were also asked to complete forms at the same time.

The SIRF team assembled all the data listed above into a packet that they reviewed with program teams on a one- to two-hour "Reflect call" at the end of each cycle. This call culminated in program staff members making decisions about how implementation would change in the following cycle.

## Learning Cycles in Action at the 10 SIRF Programs

This section is organized into three sections, each providing detail about how programs tested a specific approach—outreach, peer mentoring, or coaching—to increase participant recruitment, engagement, or retention.[4] Each section begins with a brief description of the programs that implemented that approach. Next, to illustrate how programs used learning cycles in practice, each section includes a series of program-specific charts that outline the changes made at the end of each cycle. The charts include additional detail regarding end-of-cycle decisions by providing boxes that describe:

- **ACTION:** a change or changes to be made in the next cycle[5]

- **DATA SOURCE:** the information that motivated the action that was taken

- **RATIONALE:** further detail about *how* the data sources informed the action that was taken

The charts below provide only general reflections on the approaches from the end of each learning cycle. For more details on what occurred throughout the learning cycles and final findings, see the SIRF final report here (provide link when live).

Outreach

Three programs tested a new, two-pronged approach to recruitment and outreach, in an effort to increase participant enrollment and initial engagement. First, they sought to enhance their initial recruitment efforts by expanding their use of social media and deepening relationships with referral partners. They then tried to improve program enrollment and attendance by comparing two different intake processes, one that emphasized a quick enrollment process ("ease-of-intake") and another that took a more personalized, methodical approach that focused first on supportive services ("case management intake"). Each program tailored these approaches to its local context. Moreover, these approaches evolved over the learning cycles, as described in the charts that follow.
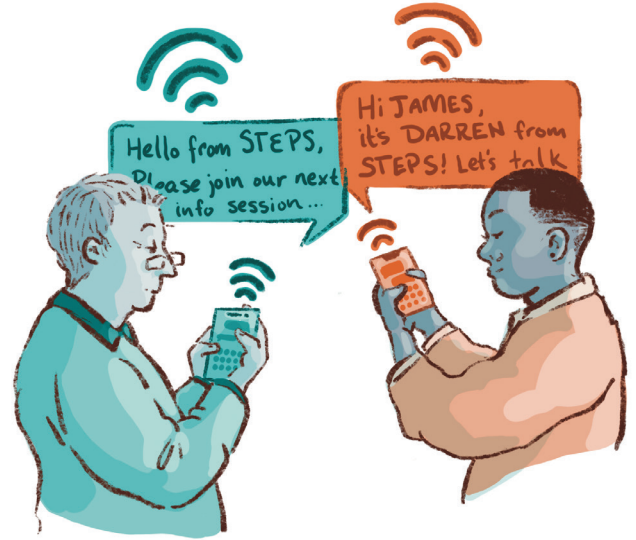
The Fatherhood FIRE and HERO Dads programs conducted four cycles each; their charts in the following pages show some of the decisions made at the ends of Cycles 1 through 3. STEPS conducted only three learning cycles, so its chart shows decisions made at the ends of Cycles 1 and 2.

Chautauqua Opportunities, Incorporated | Fatherhood FIRE

Chautauqua Opportunities, Incorporated is a Community Action Agency.* It aims to help people with low and moderate incomes achieve economic stability. The organization has partnered with the Cattaraugus County Community Action Agency to operate its fatherhood program, which serves Chautauqua and Cattaraugus counties in New York. *Fatherhood FIRE* encourages participants to build healthy and respectful relationships, resolve conflicts, and agree on child-rearing practices with the other parents of their children.

Montefiore Medical Center with BronxWorks | HERO Dads

Montefiore is an academic medical center and university hospital for the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City. In partnership with BronxWorks—a multiservice organization focusing on homelessness prevention,

supportive housing, and workforce development—it hosts the *HERO Dads* fatherhood program, which aims to help fathers who do not have custody of their children and who are facing economic barriers to achieve family and financial success.

Passages: Connecting Fathers and Families | STEPS

Passages: Connecting Fathers and Families is an organization with offices in Cuyahoga, Lorain, and Portage counties in Ohio. The organizational mission is "to inspire and empower families to thrive" through workforce development, parenthood enrichment, personal development, and advocacy. Its fatherhood program is called *Stabilizing Through Employment and Parenting Skills*, or *STEPS*.

NOTE: *Community Action Agencies are local private and public nonprofit organizations that carry out the federal Community Action Program, which was created by the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act.

	CYCLE 1	CYCLE 2	CYCLE 3
WHO conducted outreach?			
Life coaches (case managers)	CONTINUE	CONTINUE	CONTINUE
Workshop facilitators	CONTINUE	CONTINUE	CONTINUE
Outreach staff members	CONTINUE	CONTINUE	CONTINUE
Community partners	(blank)	(blank)	ADD
WHAT was their message?			
All potential participants: messages focused on fatherhood workshops and case management	CONTINUE	CHANGE	CHANGE
Ease-of-intake: messages focused on the fatherhood-related benefits of the workshop	CONTINUE	CONTINUE	CHANGE
Case management intake: messages focused on the benefits of coaching and case management	CHANGE	CHANGE	CHANGE
HOW was outreach done?			
In person	CONTINUE	CONTINUE	CONTINUE
Phone call	CONTINUE	CONTINUE	CONTINUE
Case management intake: Text message	ADD	CONTINUE	CONTINUE
Social media	ADD	CHANGE	CHANGE
Radio	CONTINUE	CONTINUE	CONTINUE
WHEN was the outreach done?			
Phone call 1 to 3 days after referral	CONTINUE	CONTINUE	CONTINUE
Intake interview	DISCONTINUE	(blank)	(blank)
Case management meeting	CHANGE	CONTINUE	CONTINUE

ACTION: Send a weekly email to partners to ask if they had candidates for referral

DATA SOURCE: SIRFboard

RATIONALE: Recruitment was the biggest factor influencing enrollment numbers.

ACTION: Send a text message "nudge" after an initial meeting

DATA SOURCE: Staff observations

RATIONALE: Many fathers did not answer their phones, so staff members thought texts might reach them better. The team only texted one group to see how effective the text messages were.

ACTION: Explicitly ask participants whether they have any pressing needs, such as assistance with jobs, housing, or transportation

DATA SOURCE: SIRFboard

RATIONALE: Fathers who require additional services or referrals to other providers could get more support.

ACTION: Add a social media post highlighting a picture from a workshop graduation

DATA SOURCE: SIRFboard

RATIONALE: Visual posts had high engagement in the previous cycle, and some fathers mentioned them when asked how they heard of the program.

KEY: Symbols indicate actions taken at the ends of learning cycles

✓ = CONTINUE

+ = ADD

↻ = CHANGE

🚫 = DISCONTINUE

MONTEFIORE MEDICAL CENTER WITH BRONXWORKS | HERO DADS

	CYCLE 1	CYCLE 2	CYCLE 3
WHO conducted outreach?			
Program recruiters	✓	✓	✓
Staff members at partner organizations	✓	✓	✓
Past participants (incentive provided for referrals)	✓	✓	✓
Intake start: Parenting and career coaches	✓	✓	✓
WHAT was their message?			
All potential participants: messages targeting a barrier to participation and reasons fathers indicate interest	✓	✓	🔄
Ease-of-intake: messages that give space for fathers to raise needs and focus on barriers to participation	✓	✓	✓
Case management intake: questions based on needs or interests, and messages that show how services meet fathers' needs	✓	🔄	✓
HOW was outreach done?			
In person	✓	✓	✓
Social media		➕	🔄
Phone calls	🔄	✓	✓
WHEN was the outreach done?			
Phone call 1-3 days after referral	🔄	✓	✓
Orientation within 1-5 days after initial contact	✓	🔄	✓

ACTION: Employ different types of social media posts— highlighting fathering skills, vocational skills, and skills at interacting with a child's other parent.

DATA SOURCE: SIRFboard

RATIONALE: Analysis indicated that those skills were the biggest reasons fathers were interested in the program.

ACTION: Add a schedule of social media posts

DATA SOURCE: Staff observations

RATIONALE: In past projects, Montefiore tested different ads and compared the number of clicks they drew. Staff members expressed a desire to try it here.

ACTION: Edit the intake scripts to allow for further personalization of the process for case management intake participants

DATA SOURCE: Staff observations

RATIONALE: The new scripts could emphasize expectations and benefits. The edits also addressed how to handle various reactions from fathers during intakes.

ACTION: Provide more orientation opportunities to the ease-of-intake group.

DATA SOURCE: Staff observations

RATIONALE: More sessions could make it easier to accommodate schedules and make enrollment easier.

KEY: Symbols indicate actions taken at the ends of learning cycles

✓ = CONTINUE

➕ = ADD

🔄 = CHANGE

🚫 = DISCONTINUE

	CYCLE 1	CYCLE 2
WHO conducted outreach?		
Case managers	✓ (CONTINUE)	🔄 (CHANGE)
Workshop facilitators	+ (ADD)	🔄 (CHANGE)
Community outreach coordinators	✓ (CONTINUE)	✓ (CONTINUE)
WHAT was their message?		
All potential participants: marketing materials portraying fathers as superheroes	✓ (CONTINUE)	✓ (CONTINUE)
Ease-of-intake: messages focused on what fathers will get out of workshops, answers to questions, practical next steps, and barriers to participation	🔄 (CHANGE)	🚫 (DISCONTINUE)
Case management intake: messages guided by an assessment of a father's needs, focusing on a primary need/goal during the first phone call and an individual development plan, accompanied by tailored text messages	🔄 (CHANGE)	🔄 (CHANGE)
HOW was outreach done?		
In person	✓ (CONTINUE)	✓ (CONTINUE)
Social media	+ (ADD)	🔄 (CHANGE)
Phone calls	🔄 (CHANGE)	✓ (CONTINUE)
Text messages	+ (ADD)	✓ (CONTINUE)
WHEN was the outreach done?		
Phone call 1-3 days after referral	✓ (CONTINUE)	✓ (CONTINUE)
Weekly check-ins until workshops start	🔄 (CHANGE)	✓ (CONTINUE)

ACTION: Case managers call and text half of the participants and facilitators call and text the other half

DATA SOURCE: Staff observations

RATIONALE: Staff members felt that their approach in Cycle 2 had not built enough rapport with fathers and tried to brainstorm other approaches. Because facilitators interact and build rapport with participants, they chose to have two different types of staff members conduct Cycle 3 outreach, to see whether responses varied.

ACTION: Run more Facebook recruitment ads in Cycle 3

DATA SOURCE: SIRFboard

RATIONALE: One portion of the SIRFboard tracked recruitment sources. A new Facebook ad recruited 36 fathers in three weeks, the largest recruitment source in the cycle.

ACTION: Stop sending ease-of-intake messages and instead send personalized case management intake text messages to both groups in Cycle 3

DATA SOURCE: SIRFboard/ nFORM participation data

RATIONALE: Preliminary data suggested that fathers who received personalized messages may have enrolled at a higher rate than the other group.

ACTION: Change the primary mode of follow-up outreach from phone to text message

DATA SOURCE: SIRFboard and staff response forms

RATIONALE: Fathers did not answer the phone for follow-up outreach. Moreover, staff members expressed desire to go "off-script" to speak more naturally.

KEY: Symbols indicate action taken at end of the relevant learning cycle

✓ = CONTINUE

+ = ADD

🔄 = CHANGE

🚫 = DISCONTINUE

Peer Mentoring

During the SIRF implementation period, four programs used alumni mentorship in an effort to improve participant engagement and retention. All participants at the programs received some form of mentoring, but the program implemented two kinds of mentoring groups: father-initiated and mentor-initiated.

The programs gave participants in both groups a mentor's contact information and told them they could reach out to him at any time, but fathers in the father-initiated group received no direct outreach from the program mentors. Fathers in the mentor-initiated group received regular outreach from the mentors. During the SIRF learning cycles, the programs focused on refining the timing, frequency, and mode of these outreach attempts from mentors.

All four programs implemented four learning cycles over the SIRF implementation period. The charts on the following pages show decisions they made at the ends of Cycles 1 through 3.

Action for Children | All in Dads!

Action for Children was founded in 1972 to help strengthen local childcare services in Franklin County, Ohio. The organization currently serves as a childcare resource and referral agency, and it provides supportive services for both mothers and fathers. Its fatherhood program is called *All in Dads!*

Center for Family Services | Framing Fatherhood

Center for Family Services was founded in 1920 to support individuals and families in need. Providing services throughout New Jersey, the organization helps children and families through therapy, education, counseling, shelter, support, and advocacy, and through services related to addiction and recovery, workforce development, and early childhood.

City of Long Beach | Fundamentals of Fatherhood

The City of Long Beach Department of Health and Human Services is one of three health departments in California that are run at the city level. Its mission is to "improve quality of life by promoting a safe and healthy community in which to live, work and play."

Connections to Success | Personal and Professional Development

Connections to Success began as the first St. Louis–area location of Dress for Success, a program designed to provide women with low incomes professional clothing for job interviews. Over time, the founders identified other needs in the community and expanded to offer multiple forms of family support. In 2001, the organization merged various services being provided and formed Connections to Success, which now operates in three locations.

ACTION FOR CHILDREN | ALL IN DADS!

ACTION: Discontinue partnership with community mentors and transition to pairing participants with mentors who were recent program alumni

DATA SOURCES: SIRFboard and staff observations

RATIONALE: *All in Dads!* was a new program and did not have a pool of alumni mentors when the study launched. However, the SIRFboard showed a lack of community mentor engagement in Cycle 1, which staff members confirmed during a Reflect call.

	CYCLE 1	CYCLE 2	CYCLE 3
WHO are the mentors?			
Community members	🚫		
Program alumni	➕	✔	✔
WHAT is the mentors' message to the fathers?			
"I've been there before."	✔	✔	✔
"I'm here to support you."	✔	✔	✔
"I'm here for you, please reach out."	✔	✔	✔
"You can do it."	✔	✔	✔
HOW are mentors reaching out to fathers?			
FaceTime/video calls	✔	✔	✔
Phone calls	✔	✔	🔄
Text messages	✔	✔	🔄
Face to face	✔	✔	🔄
Social media	✔	✔	✔
WHEN are the mentors reaching out to fathers?			
After missed sessions	✔	🚫	
After classes 3, 5, 7, and 9	✔	🔄	✔
At orientation	➕	🚫	
Before orientation		➕	🚫

ACTION: Adjust the focus of outreach methods from text messages to more engaging methods such as phone calls or face-to-face interactions

DATA SOURCE: SIRFboard

RATIONALE: During Cycle 3, the All in Dads! team observed that the response rate to mentor outreach was low, so they chose to focus on more engaging outreach methods.

ACTION: Throughout the three cycles, adjust when and how frequently mentor outreach occurred

DATA SOURCE: Mentor reflection forms and SIRFboard

RATIONALE: Mentors shared that outreach was difficult to complete while balancing demands from work, life, and family. The SIRFboard also showed that outreach did not always occur as planned when it was scheduled to happen frequently.

KEY: Symbols indicate actions taken at the ends of learning cycles

✔ = CONTINUE

➕ = ADD

🔄 = CHANGE

🚫 = DISCONTINUE

	CYCLE 1	CYCLE 2	CYCLE 3
WHO are the mentors?			
Program alumni	✓	✓	✓
WHAT is the mentors' message to the fathers?			
"I've been through this before."	✓	✓	✓
"This program can help you if you show up."			＋
HOW are mentors reaching out to fathers?			
Phone calls	✓	✓	✓
Text messages	✓	✓	↻
Face to face	✓	✓	✓
Email		＋	✓
WHEN are the mentors reaching out to fathers?			
During an initial follow-up meeting after enrollment	✓	✓	↻
After Week 1	＋	⛔	
After Week 2 (Session 4)	⛔	＋	↻
In Week 6	⛔	✓	✓
If fathers missed a session(s)	↻	✓	⛔
Upon workshop completion	✓	✓	↻
During mentor participation in Week 3 and Week 4 workshops	＋	✓	✓
During recruitment activities	＋	✓	✓

ACTION: Continue implementation as it was into Cycle 3

DATA SOURCES: Staff observations

RATIONALE: In Cycle 2, the program struggled with implementation due to challenges of low recruitment and difficulties communicating with fathers at a residential site. Since they didn't collect much data in Cycle 2, during the Reflect call the staff decided to make minimal changes to implementation in Cycle 3.

ACTION: Introduce email as a method of mentor outreach

DATA SOURCE: SIRFboard and staff observations

RATIONALE: The SIRFboard showed that fathers at a new residential service location had very low response rates to phone call or text outreach because the facility limited access to phones. However, the staff learned that fathers had access to computers, leading to the introduction of email as an outreach approach.

ACTION: Add in-person contacts between mentors and program participants

DATA SOURCE: Mentor response forms

RATIONALE: Mentors seemed to be having a hard time building relationships with fathers within the Cycle 1 parameters of outreach. The program decided to include mentors in workshops and recruitment events to give them more relationship-building opportunities.

KEY: Symbols indicate actions taken at the ends of learning cycles

✓ = CONTINUE
＋ = ADD
↻ = CHANGE
⛔ = DISCONTINUE

ACTION: Expand the pool of potential mentors to both current staff members and program alumni who graduated before the start of the SIRF study

DATA SOURCES: Staff reflection forms

RATIONALE: The staff reflection forms showed that a major difficulty in maintaining fidelity to the intervention was mentor burnout. The program decided to increase its mentor pool by reaching out to earlier alumni to reduce the burden on individual mentors. Program staff members also filled in when needed.

	CYCLE 1	CYCLE 2	CYCLE 3
WHO are the mentors?			
Program alumni	✓	CHANGE	✓
WHAT is the mentors' message to the fathers?			
"This is what I went through; I've been there."	✓	✓	✓
"Here is how the program helped me."	✓	✓	✓
"You can do it."	✓	✓	✓
HOW are mentors reaching out to fathers?			
At orientation/initial intake (virtual)	✓	✓	✓
One-on-one by text, phone, and in-person visits	✓	CHANGE	✓
At in-person gatherings (such as graduation ceremonies)	✓	✓	✓
WHEN are the mentors reaching out to fathers?			
Before the first session	✓	DISCONTINUE	✓
After the Week 2 session	✓	✓	CHANGE
Week 5		ADD	CHANGE
After the Week 8 session	✓	✓	✓
After any missed session	✓	DISCONTINUE	
After milestones (getting a job, etc.)	✓	CHANGE	✓
Every two weeks	ADD	DISCONTINUE	

ACTION: Discontinue outreach at several points in the process that mentors were having trouble with

DATA SOURCE: SIRFboard

RATIONALE: In Cycle 2, the *Fundamentals of Fatherhood* team noticed in the SIRFboard that certain outreach points had low completion rates due to their proximity to other mentor outreach points or activities.

ACTION: Discontinue mentor outreach after missed sessions.

DATA SOURCE: Staff observations

RATIONALE: The program made staff members other than mentors responsible for "accountability outreach." This change better reflected the already existing delegation of responsibilities among program staff members at City of Long Beach.

KEY: Symbols indicate actions taken at the ends of learning cycles

✓ = CONTINUE

+ = ADD

⟳ = CHANGE

⊘ = DISCONTINUE

CONNECTIONS TO SUCCESS | PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

ACTION: Include program staff members as backup mentors, to step in if there are not sufficient mentors for the number of program participants or if mentors disengage

DATA SOURCES: SIRFboard and staff observations

RATIONALE: Mentor outreach to mentees was not occurring as frequently as planned due to difficulties keeping mentors engaged. Having staff members (some of whom had previously been program participants) act as backup mentors would ensure that there were always mentors available for participants.

ACTION: No change

DATA SOURCE: Staff reflection forms and observations

RATIONALE: Throughout the implementation period, the program felt that messages were working as planned and were benefiting participants. It opted to keep the basic messages the same throughout, while focusing on adjusting the timing and mode of communication.

ACTION: Discontinue ad hoc mentor outreach after milestones or at events

DATA SOURCE: SIRFboard and staff observations

RATIONALE: Data showed that over the first few cycles, mentors were not successfully conducting outreach after missed sessions or milestones. Staff members indicated that there was no reasonable way for mentors to receive and act on attendance or related information in a timely manner. Staff members would reach out instead.

	CYCLE 1	CYCLE 2	CYCLE 3
WHO are the mentors?			
Program alumni	✓	🔄	✓
Staff		✚	✓
WHAT is the mentors' message to the fathers?			
"I'm part of your team. Reach out to me if you have any questions or concerns."	✓	✓	✓
"I've been there before."	✓	✓	✓
"Here is how the program helped me."	✓	✓	✓
HOW are mentors reaching out to fathers?			
At orientation/initial intake (primarily in person)	✓	✓	✓
One-on-one by text message, phone call, and in-person visits	✓	✓	✓
Through small-group, in-person sessions	✓	🔄	🚫
At group events to celebrate workshop completion	✓	🔄	🚫
WHEN are the mentors reaching out to fathers?			
During outreach/recruitment		✚	🚫
Between intake and workshop start	🚫		
After Session 1 or 2 of Week 1	✓	🔄	🔄
End of Week 1	✓	🚫	
Around the start of Week 2	✓	🚫	
Immediately after Session 1 of Week 3	🚫		
At the workshop's midpoint		✚	✓
At program completion	✚	✓	✓
After missed sessions	✓	✓	🚫
After milestones	✓	✓	🚫
At no additional times after two outreach attempts with no response	✓	✓	🔄

Coaching

As a part of SIRF, three programs implemented new coaching techniques and skills to support case management that emphasized and was guided by fathers' own goals. In doing so, staff members sought to make a priority of fathers' long-term goals; in recruitment efforts, communicate in ways consistent with the father-led, nondirective nature of coaching; and foster relationships between coaches and fathers so that dads set goals they were motivated to achieve.

Thriving Fathers and Families conducted three learning cycles during the study period, so its program table shows decisions made at the ends of Cycles 1 and 2. The Fatherhood Initiative and Ignite! each conducted four learning cycles, so their program charts show decisions made at the ends of Cycles 1 through 3.

All three programs tended to focus on strengthening and increasing the use of their coaching techniques from cycle to cycle. They made fewer changes to their implementation plans than did programs in the outreach and peer mentoring clusters.

Children's Home and Aid | Thriving Fathers and Families

Children's Home and Aid is a child and family services agency located in over 65 counties in Illinois. Its fatherhood program, with offices in Rockford and Bloomington counties, is called *Thriving Fathers and Families*.

Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County | Fatherhood Initiative

Housing Opportunities Commission of Montgomery County is an affordable housing provider and human services agency located in Montgomery County, Maryland. Its fatherhood program is called *Fatherhood Initiative*.

Jewish Family and Children's Services | Ignite!

Jewish Family and Children's Services of the Suncoast is a mental health and human services agency located in Sarasota, Manatee, and Charlotte counties in Florida. Its fatherhood program is called *Ignite!*

CHILDREN'S HOME AND AID | THRIVING FATHERS AND FAMILIES

	CYCLE 1	CYCLE 2
WHO used coaching techniques with fathers?		
Navigator (coach)	✓	✓
Employment specialist	**+**	✓
WHAT happened during coaching sessions?		
Staff members assessed fathers' needs.	✓	✓
Fathers set personal goals.	✓	✓
Staff members provided resources and referrals.	✓	✓
Staff members used various coaching and motivational techniques to help fathers rank needs and set goals.	✓	✓
HOW did coaching occur?		
Weekly sessions between navigators and fathers (virtual or in person)	✓	✓
Every-other-week sessions between employment specialists and fathers (virtual or in person)	✓	✓
WHEN did coaching happen?		
12 months of case management/coaching sessions	✓	✓
Outreach	**+**	✓
Résumé workshop and interview prep	**+**	✓

ACTION: Train employment specialists in coaching techniques

DATA SOURCE: Staff observations

RATIONALE: Employment specialists and navigators collaborated to provide résumé workshops and interview prep to fathers. Having both the navigators and employment specialists using coaching techniques allowed them to deliver consistent messages.

ACTION: Have navigators reach out to fathers by phone or email

DATA SOURCE: Staff observations

RATIONALE: Navigators experienced challenges scheduling sessions with fathers and wanted to establish better relationships with fathers to encourage them to come to workshops and coaching sessions.

KEY: Symbols indicate action taken at end of the relevant learning cycle

✓ = CONTINUE

+ = ADD

⟳ = CHANGE

🚫 = DISCONTINUE

HOUSING OPPORTUNITIES COMMISSION OF MONTGOMERY COUNTY | FATHERHOOD INITIATIVE

	CYCLE 1	CYCLE 2	CYCLE 3
WHO used coaching techniques with fathers?			
Case manager (coach)	✓	✓	✓
WHAT happened during coaching sessions?			
Case managers assessed fathers' needs.	✓	✓	✓
Fathers set personal goals.	✓	✓	✓
Case managers provided resources and referrals to fathers.	✓	✓	✓
Case managers used various coaching and motivational techniques to help fathers rank needs and set goals.	✓	✓	✓
HOW did coaching occur?			
Virtual sessions with case managers and fathers (at least twice during the four-week workshop period)	✓	✓	✓
Intake/enrollment appointments with the recruiter and fathers	✓	✓	✓
Phone calls with fathers when the recruiter was telling them about the programs	✓	✓	✓
WHEN did coaching happen?			
Group text messages			+
Outreach	✓	✓	✓
Intake/enrollment	✓	✓	✓
12 months of case management/coaching sessions	✓	🔄	✓
Sessions before the first workshop		+	✓
First workshop		+	✓

KEY: Symbols indicate action taken at end of the relevant learning cycle

✓ = CONTINUE

✛ = ADD

🔄 = CHANGE

🚫 = DISCONTINUE

ACTION: Increase the number of case management sessions from two to three over the four-week workshop period

DATA SOURCE: Staff observations

RATIONALE: More frequent meetings between case managers and fathers would allow them to build rapport and could increase fathers' workshop attendance.

ACTION: Use group text messages for each entering group of fathers to centralize communication

DATA SOURCE: Staff observations

RATIONALE: One goal of adding group text messages was to send reminders to fathers about workshops. Group text messaging was also a way to encourage fathers to attend workshops and to share resources.

ACTION: Meet each father a week before workshops started and at the first workshop session

DATA SOURCE: Staff observations

RATIONALE: Meeting fathers a week earlier would give fathers a chance to learn more about the program and its expectations, and to start thinking about their personal goals. Attending the first workshop session allowed case managers to remind fathers that coaches are there to support them and fathers can schedule individual sessions with them, and to introduce them to workshop instructors.

	CYCLE 1	CYCLE 2	CYCLE 3
WHO used coaching techniques with fathers?			
Fatherhood advocate (coach)	✓	✓	✓
WHAT happened during coaching sessions?			
Advocates assessed fathers' needs.	✓	✓	✓
Fathers and advocates developed individual service plans for fathers.	✓	✓	✓
Advocates provided resources and referrals to fathers.	✓	✓	✓
Advocates used various coaching techniques and motivational techniques to help fathers rank needs and set goals.	✓	✓	✓
HOW did coaching occur?			
Weekly "microsessions" that connected coaching techniques to the workshop curricula	✚	✓	✓
Meetings between fatherhood advocates and fathers after workshop sessions	✓	✓	✓
Reviews of recorded coaching sessions			✚
WHEN did coaching happen?			
Drop-in coaching "office hours"	✓	🚫	
During workshop sessions with facilitators	✓	✓	✓
In small-group activities during in-person program sessions	✓	✓	✓
In meetings with fatherhood advocates that could continue for up to a year after the workshop ended	✓	✓	✓

ACTION: Link the fatherhood workshop curriculum, On My Shoulders, to case management sessions to reinforce how the curriculum applies to fathers' lives

DATA SOURCE: Father reaction forms

RATIONALE: Fathers responded that the workshop topics were the most useful part of the program.

ACTION: Discontinue drop-in coaching "office hours."

DATA SOURCE: Staff reaction forms

RATIONALE: At the end of Cycle 2, program staff members noted that participants weren't attending drop-in coaching sessions.

ACTION: Encourage fatherhood advocates to listen for opportunities to provide resources and support to fathers that are consistent with the father-led, nondirective approach of coaching

DATA SOURCE: Reflect call.

RATIONALE: Ignite! staff members recorded and reviewed sessions with fatherhood advocates to identify strengths, weaknesses, and missed opportunities.

KEY: Symbols indicate action taken at end of the relevant learning cycle

✓ = CONTINUE

✚ = ADD

🔄 = CHANGE

🚫 = DISCONTINUE

Conclusion

Learning cycles using the Learn-Do-Reflect framework described above can help social service programs, including those focused on fatherhood, to respond and adapt as they assess real-world program needs. The examples presented in this brief illustrate the ways SIRF programs used data in a structured way to make changes to implementation.[6]

Central to the Learn-Do-Reflect model is a learning environment that encourages program staff members to collect and analyze data, and then use that information to make decisions. Throughout the study period, program staff members noted how helpful the learning cycles were in developing a shared understanding of program challenges and successes, largely because of this data-centered approach. Even if programs are not prepared to implement a full learning cycle framework, they may still benefit from focused considerations—and analysis—of program data and participant and staff observations.

Notes and References

1   For more information on SIRF and learning cycles, see Charles Michalopoulos, Rebecca Behrmann, and Michelle S. Manno, *Using Learning Cycles to Strengthen Fatherhood Programs: An Introduction to the Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF) Study*, OPRE Report 2022-62 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

2   The SIRF approaches were tested with experimental designs using data across the cycles. The findings from these tests will be presented in a final study report. See Charles Michalopoulos, Emily Marano, Becca Heilman, Michelle Manno, Patrizia Mancini, and Scott Cody, *Using Learning Cycles to Strengthen Fatherhood Programs: Final Report on the Strengthening the Implementation of Responsible Fatherhood Programs (SIRF) Study*, OPRE Report 2023-60 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

3   The Learn-Do-Reflect framework developed by MDRC can be used in multiple contexts, including outside of the learning-cycle environment. Additionally, it is not the only method for structuring or implementing rapid learning within programs; there are other approaches and frameworks that involve collecting data to answer specific questions quickly, often to support program improvement.

4   Coaching is an intervention strategy in which a coach works in partnership with a father to set and attain goals. Coaching is nondirective, unlike traditional case management where case managers tell fathers what to do. For more information on how the approaches were selected see Emily Marano, Dina A. R. Israel, and Diego Quezada, "What Strategies Can Programs Use to Help More Dads Participate in Fatherhood Services?" OPRE Report 2022-65 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022); Rebecca Behrmann, Becca Heilman, Kureem Nugent, and Donna Wharton-Fields, "Walking in Participants' Shoes: Customer Journey Mapping as a Tool to Identify Barriers to Program Participation," OPRE Report 2022-131 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

5   The changes highlighted in the charts and callout boxes do not represent all changes made throughout the study period. They were selected by the SIRF team to highlight the different ways that data informed program decisions.

6   For more details on the results of the SIRF Study, see Michalopoulous et al. (2023).

Acknowledgments

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