

## **Child Support Compliance in Fatherhood Programs: The Role of Hope, Role Salience, and Parenting Skills**

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*Non-resident fathers' compliance with child support agreements is low. An estimated 50% of fathers never pay any formal support to their co-parents (Stykes, Manning, & Brown, 2013). Responsible fatherhood programs have been developed as an alternative to incarceration to provide parenting and other skills to fathers in the hopes of increasing their payment compliance. This study adds to the sparse literature on the evaluation of responsible fatherhood programs by quantitatively examining the role of hope, parenting role salience, and parenting skills in predicting changes in child support compliance attitudes. The sample was drawn from participants in community-based responsible fatherhood programs. Results indicated that as fathers reported greater improvements in parenting skills and hope for the future, they also reported greater intentions to comply with child support agreements. Implications for fatherhood educational program design and implementation are discussed.*

**Keywords:** fatherhood, parenting, programs, child support, parenting roles, family life education

### **Introduction**

The average financial burden of raising a child from birth to age 18 has been estimated to be as high as \$200,000 (Lino, Kuczynski, Rodriguez, & Schap, 2015). In households headed by single parents, the burden of this cost may be formally divided through the implementation of child support agreements between the child's co-parents. However, compliance with these agreements is often low. About 50% of nonresident fathers never pay any formal child support to their respective co-parent (Stykes, Manning, & Brown, 2013). Responsible fatherhood (RF) educational programs have emerged as a strategy to increase father involvement, teach parenting skills, and address the economic circumstances faced by many fathers who are involved in child support enforcement systems. Extension staff, most commonly in Family and Consumer Sciences or even 4-H Youth Development departments (e.g., the Dads Make a Difference Program, 2019), are often charged with developing and delivering RF and other educational parenting programs aimed at men. Although these programs have existed for at least two

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decades, relatively few evaluation studies have been published. The present study responds to a long-standing, yet sparsely heeded, call for evaluations of the processes of change within RF programs (Barnow & Stapleton, 1997) by applying the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991) to quantitatively examine the role of hope, parenting role salience, and parenting skills in predicting changes in child support compliance intentions among RF program participants.

### **RF Programs and Child Support Enforcement**

A major referral source for participation in fatherhood programs is the child support enforcement (CSE) system within each state (Pirog & Ziol-Guest, 2006). The named goal of most CSE agencies is to ensure the economic wellbeing of families with children (Cancian, Meyer, & Han, 2011). To achieve this goal, most CSE systems utilize a process of paternity establishment, making a financial arrangement, and collecting payments (Solomon-Fears, Smith, & Berry, 2012).

However, once a financial arrangement has been made, it is relatively uncommon for the system to be 100% effective in collecting payments. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has reported that up to 54% of child support arrearages for individual fathers amount to \$30,000 or more. Including arrearages as low as \$10,000, the figure rises to 86% of noncustodial fathers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2007). Data regarding noncompliance obscure the fathers' own financial strains and the reality that current social policy does not support their economic stability to the same degree that disadvantaged mothers are supported (Cancian et al., 2011). Furthermore, qualitative study reveals that many nonresident fathers struggle with a child support enforcement system that may not acknowledge the unique challenges they face, imposing unrealistic financial expectations and discounting the various forms of involvement that fathers may show other than making child support payments (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015; Waller, 2010).

The consequences of noncompliance with CSE agencies are often quite severe. Incarceration is not uncommon, with some locales estimating that 13% of CSE-involved fathers are in jail or have been jailed in the past for noncompliance (Ovwigo, Saunders, & Born, 2005). However, incarceration only exacerbates the debt of incarcerated fathers, because arrearages continue to accumulate while they are in jail (Turetsky, 2007). Overall, existing research suggests that the majority of fathers involved with CSE agencies face rather severe economic hardship. This hardship is well-documented as a barrier to compliance with child support orders (Huang, Mincy, & Garfinkel, 2005; Kim, Cancian, & Meyer, 2015; Sorensen & Zibman, 2001).

The CSE agencies' emphasis on nonresident fathers' financial responsibility is clear. Some research suggests that the emphasis on financial contribution also figures prominently into parents' (both mothers' and fathers') conceptualizations of responsible fatherhood. For example, in a series of interviews with low-income parents, Waller (2010) found that the parents she interviewed viewed financial contribution as a responsibility of nonresident fathers.

Furthermore, Waller's resident parents noted that a combination of both formal *and* informal contributions from the non-resident parent (e.g., gifts of cash or child-care items) was the most desirable arrangement.

A large number of RF program participants nationwide are unemployed at the time of participation, and as a result, most unemployed fathers in these programs are not making child support payments (Holcomb et al., 2015). In addition, many participants report that the limited or temporary employment they are most readily able to secure often does not pay enough to keep up with child support payments (Holcomb et al., 2015).

Overall, this suggests that employment status is a significant factor when considering a father's intention to make child support payments. Importantly, the strong emphasis from both agencies and resident parents on financial contribution may actually come at the detriment of fathers' willingness to be involved at all with their children, especially for those fathers who are excited to establish paternity yet are unaware that this procedure generally results in a child support payment order (Jordan-Zachery, 2009; Pate, 2002).

### **An Expanded View of Fathers' Roles**

Such a heavy emphasis on the role of financial provider and on the practical ability of fathers to pay child support does not consider the important role that several other factors, such as attitudes and emotions, play in fathers' child support compliance. Threlfall and Kohl (2015) found that their sample of non-resident, African-American fathers struggled with a lack of hope for the future, perceptions of systematic bias within the child support system, and a lack of parenting efficacy. The investigators suggested that part of what explained these fathers' lack of hope was their negative views of the child support system and how it characterizes involvement with their children. Fathers in Threlfall and Kohl's study tended to express that their role as fathers had been reduced to simply whether or not they comply with financial child support agreements.

Furthermore, responsible fatherhood programs are sometimes seen as simply a façade for the enforcement of child support orders (Anderson, Kohler, & Letiecq, 2002). Program facilitators who were part of Threlfall and Kohl's study noted that the psychological strain associated with involvement in child support systems, and possibly facing payment arrearages, erodes participation in parenting programs aimed at fathers. Beyond the erosion of program participation, fathers who face payment arrearages may also be struggling psychologically. Researchers have noted that men who feel as though they add no value to their families tend to be at greater risk for symptoms of depression and suicidal ideation (Emslie, Ridge, Ziebland, & Hunt, 2006).

These findings suggest that if child support compliance is a desired outcome of responsible fatherhood program participation, RF programs must consider the psychological needs of fathers when providing educational programs and services. Threlfall and Kohl (2015) suggested that

quantitative research of fatherhood programs should examine the interrelationship between child support compliance and other potential outcomes of participation in RF programs beyond job skills training and employment support. Specifically, if RF programs that include content on parenting and self-care have the potential to positively impact psychological health and fathers' perceptions of their own parenting skills. If so, such programs may help expand fathers' conceptions of fatherhood to something beyond paying child support.

There is some evidence (Anderson et al., 2002; Lewin-Bizan, 2015) that existing fatherhood programs may improve fathers' skills and attitudes toward parenting. These programs achieve their outcomes through financial and other life-skills coaching, job readiness training, psychotherapy, and parenting education. However, to date, no studies have attempted to link these improvements in so-called "soft skills" to intentions of child support compliance.

Azjen's (1985, 1991) theory of planned behavior suggests that stronger intentions to engage in a behavior increase the likelihood of actually performing the behavior. In Azjen's theory, attitudes toward the behavior (i.e., is the outcome desirable?) and perceptions of ability to perform the behavior may also influence the intention to engage in a behavior. In RF programs, it is assumed that, as fathers become involved with their children in ways beyond paying child support, they are more likely to comply with child support agreements (Huang, 2009; Nepomnyaschy, 2007).

This study represents an evaluation examining the processes of change in target outcomes. This approach adds to the sparse literature on the evaluation of RF programs by quantitatively examining the role of enhanced hope, greater parenting role salience, and perception of greater parenting skills in predicting changes in child support compliance intentions. The theory of planned behavior suggests that changes in these attitudes and perceived abilities may influence the intentions to comply with child support.

Given prior qualitative findings (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015), we expected that as fathers improve in the psychological and behavioral constructs outlined above, their intentions to comply with child support would also improve. Fathers who fall behind on child support payments are often directed to responsible fatherhood (RF) programs as an alternative to contempt of court and resulting incarceration. Therefore, studying this population has practical implications for the professionals, including Extension educators, who deliver fatherhood programming (Jordan, 2001; Maiorano & Futris, 2005).

## **Methods**

The sample of participants for this study consisted of 602 nonresident fathers who participated in RF programs in multiple counties of a southern state. Like many other RF programs nationwide, the program participant pool was recruited mostly through child support enforcement agencies.

The mean age of the sample was 36.8 years old, with a range from 17 to 70 years of age ( $SD = 9.5$  years). The participants in the sample were 58% Black, 39% White, and 3% other races. Participants reported mostly completing high school or lesser educational attainment, with 30% never finishing high school, 51% having only a high school diploma/GED, 11% having a trade school or technical certificate, and 8% having a bachelor's degree or higher.

Sixty-five percent of the sample reported being currently unemployed, and 75% of the sample reported a household income of less than \$10,000 annually. Taken together, these demographic data place participants in a lower socioeconomic bracket.

The current relationship status of the sample was mostly single and never married (38%), followed by committed relationship and unmarried (20%), married (15%), separated (8%), divorced (17%), and widowed (2%). Those in a couple relationship were not in a couple relationship with the mother to whom they have a child support obligation. All were noncustodial fathers. On average, participants had more than two total children each, regardless of mother ( $M = 2.35$  children;  $SD = 1.4$  children).

### **The Intervention**

Participants received curriculum-based, fatherhood-specific educational instruction from facilitators at several community-based cooperative extension offices and family resource centers throughout a southeastern state. Facilitators of the program were all trained, paid staff with experience in community-based education at each site (e.g., social workers, extension educators, para-educators). The program employed a fatherhood-specific curriculum component in addition to specific job skills and financial management training. The curriculum used was *24/7 Dads*, which involves a 12-week group meeting format wherein various parenting, relationship, and stress management topics are taught to fathers. This curriculum is supported by several local evaluation reports, including reports created by outside evaluators (e.g., Lewin-Bizan, 2015) documenting the ability of the program to provide fathers the skills and information necessary to enhance their involvement in child-rearing.

While participating in the curriculum, participants also received job search assistance and job skills training from case managers at each family resource center. For example, RF staff conduct mock interviews, assist participants with preparing resumés, and help participants to obtain presentable clothing for potential interviews. The RF staff also have agreements with local employers to receive first word of potential employment opportunities. If RF staff do not have the ability to train participants in particular job skills (e.g., welding), they procure the funds to sponsor participant attendance in outside classes. Upon terminating program services, fathers completed a questionnaire assessing their healthy relationship skills, parenting skills, and child support compliance intentions.

## Measures

All data collection procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Auburn University. Consistent with typical IRB regulations, participants were given the option of skipping any question they were uncomfortable answering. All surveys were anonymous. Participants were assured that their answers had no bearing on their ability to participate in or continue receiving services from the RF program.

All measures were assessed in a retrospective pre/post format. Participants were asked at program completion to retrospectively rate their pre-program responses, as well as provide an after-completion-of-the-program rating response to each item. The use of a retrospective pre/post format when assessing program effects has been shown to reduce response bias (Pratt, McGuigan, & Katzev, 2000). Pratt et al.'s (2000) study showed that study participants are less likely to either over- or underestimate their pre-test understanding of elements of the curriculum when asked in a retrospective format. Specifically, it is difficult for participants to be able to articulate what they know or do not know about a particular area targeted by the program before actually experiencing the program. In addition, Lam and Bengo (2003) argued that the retrospective pre/post format is less susceptible to socially desirable response bias than other methods. Thus, when attempting to measure participants' perceptions of their learning over the course of a program, a retrospective design has been shown to produce more accurate assessments of learning outcomes and participants' perceptions of change due to program participation than traditional pre- and post-test methods (Davis, 2003; Rockwell & Kohn, 1989).

Five factors were measured in this study to match the stated objectives of the RF programs: child support compliance intent, relationship with child, parenting role salience, parenting skills, and hope for the future.

Child support compliance intent was measured using a global item ("I am committed to making full child support payments each month") rated on a 7-point scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. The global item wording and response scale mirrors items on other established commitment scales, (e.g., Ajzen, Czasch, & Flood, 2009; Stanley & Markman, 1992).

Relationship with child was assessed using a three-item scale: (1) I share a warm, affectionate relationship with my child. (2) If upset, my child will seek comfort from me (3). My child values his/her relationship with me. The items were drawn from Pianta's (1994) Child-Parent Relationship Scale (for the current sample, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89$ ). Responses ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Early piloting of the full scale allowed for psychometric analyses to inform item reduction.

Parenting role salience was measured using two items from the Parental Role Commitment Scale (1) I expect to devote a significant amount of time and energy to raising my children. (2) I expect to be involved in the day to day matters of raising my child. The items were drawn from

Amatea, Cross, Clark, and Bobby (1986; for the current sample, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .79$ ). Responses ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Early piloting of the full scale allowed for psychometric analyses to inform item reduction.

Parenting skills were measured using three items assessing the frequency of positive parenting behaviors. (1) How often do you give reasons why rules should be obeyed? (2) How often do you give praise? (3) How often do you explain the consequences of their behavior? For the current sample, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ . Responses ranged from 1 = *almost never* to 7 = *very often*. The items were developed and validated in prior pilot studies (e.g., Adler-Baeder, Calligas, Skuban, Keiley, Ketring, & Smith, 2013).

Hope for the future was measured using three items from the State Hope Scale (1) I can think of many ways to reach my goals. (2) Right now, I see myself as being pretty successful. (3) I am energetically pursuing my goals. Items were drawn from Snyder and colleagues (1996; for the current sample, Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ ). Responses ranged from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Early piloting of the full scale allowed for psychometric analyses to inform item reduction.

## Results

To establish post-program change in child support compliance intentions, a paired-sample t-test was conducted comparing pre-program ratings with post-program ratings on the five factors of interest. See Table 1 for a summary. Results showed that on average, fathers reported statistically significant improvement in the intent to comply with child support (pre-program mean: 4.9; post-program mean = 5.8;  $t(601) = -12.8, p < .001$ ).

**Table 1. Results of Paired Samples T-tests for Study Variables Across 2 Timepoints**

	T1 Mean (SD)	T2 Mean (SD)	t (df)
Hope	4.8 (1.6)	6.1 (1.1)	21.8 (601) ***
Role Salience	4.9 (1.2)	5.7 (1.1)	16.8 (601) ***
Parenting Skills	5.3 (1.5)	6.2 (1.2)	19.4 (601) ***
CSCI	5.0 (2.0)	5.8 (1.8)	12.8 (601) ***

Note: N = 602; SD = standard deviation; CSCI = Child support compliance intentions; \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

A stepwise multiple regression model was then fit (see Table 2) to the data predicting post-program child support compliance intentions accounting for pre-program levels. Collinearity statistics were within acceptable limits for all predictors (Tolerance  $> .5$ ). Work status (employed full time, part time, or not working) and pre-program father-child relationship were entered as controls (Model 1), with post-program difference scores (post minus pre) of hope, parenting role salience, and parenting skills as the predictors of interest (Model 2). Results showed that Model 1 predicted 43% of the variance. Results from Model 2 indicated that hope

( $\beta = .12, p < .001$ ), role salience ( $\beta = .19, p < .001$ ) and parenting skills ( $\beta = .12, p < .001$ ) independently predicted post-program child support compliance intentions. As participants reported greater post-program change in hope, role salience, and parenting skills, they tended to report greater change in child support compliance intentions. Model 2 accounted for an additional 10% of the variance in post-program child support compliance intentions.

**Table 2. Stepwise Regression Predicting Residual Post-Program Change in Child Support Compliance Intentions**

	Model 1			Model 2		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$
T1 CSCI	.58***	.03	.66	.62***	.03	.71
T1 Father-child relationship	-.04	.07	-.03	.13	.04	.10
T1 Work Status	.04	.07	.02	.08**	.06	.04
Role Salience				.19***	.06	.19
Hope				.15**	.04	.12
Parenting Skills				.17**	.05	.12
	$R^2$	.43		$R^2$	.53	

Note: CSCI = Child support compliance intentions; \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

Fathers involved in the child support system may feel withdrawn from their parenting role due to the overemphasis on financial responsibility (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). Given the economic challenges faced by many fathers involved in RF programs, expanding their understanding of fatherhood beyond financial obligation is an important task of RF staff. Guided by the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991), we found that, as fathers' parenting skills and hopefulness for the future improved in the course of a program, they also reported greater post-program changes in child support compliance intentions. These findings have theoretical and practical implications for those working within RF programs.

The present study suggests that providing fathers with parenting skills education and positively effecting change in this area is associated with greater changes in intent to pay child support. RF program staff may capitalize on the link between changes in parenting skills and child support compliance intentions by targeting skills in which participants see a need for improvement. A simple needs assessment may accomplish this task. Fathers who perceive an increase in their parenting skills may see contact with their children as a more desirable event. The theory of planned behavior would suggest that a father who perceives contact with his children more favorably may view compliance with child support as a means of actually engaging with his children. This may also fulfill a typical desire to feel useful toward the family (Emslie et al., 2006).



Our measure of parenting role salience taps into the expectation that fathers have to be involved in their children's lives on a day-to-day basis. Fathers who intend to spend a greater amount of time and energy with their children may find practical value in contributing to a stable economic environment for their children (Huang, 2009; Nepomnyaschy, 2007). As RF program staff help fathers to see themselves as active members of their children's lives, compliance with financial obligations may be seen as a component of this involvement.

Results also suggest that enhancing fathers' sense of hopefulness about the future is a predictor of positive change in child support compliance intentions. The theory of planned behavior would suggest that hopelessness may influence a father's perception of his ability to comply with child support agreements, thus reducing his intention to comply. Feelings of hopelessness can be related to depression and, as such, RF programs can serve as an important gateway for fathers to identify and seek needed mental health services. There is a consistent finding in the literature that men are overall less likely than women to seek help related to issues of psychological health, although this association does vary somewhat among cultures (Moller-Leimkuhler, 2002; Vogel, Heimerdinger-Edwards, Hammer, & Hubbard, 2011). Furthermore, when men experience symptoms of disorders such as depression, these symptoms are more likely to be dismissed by either family or professionals as physical in origin (Moller-Leimkuhler, 2002). Our finding that hopefulness for the future is a contributor to overall changes in intent to comply with child support suggests that dismissing men's feelings of hopelessness is not just costly for the man himself, but it may also be a costly misappraisal for his children.

For many fathers in RF programs, enhanced feelings of hopefulness may be related to their feelings of enhanced parenting skills and may be specifically related to the programs' work to improve their ability to navigate the child support system (Threlfall & Kohl, 2015). In addition, most RF programs (including the program covered in this study) include job search assistance and some job training elements as part of program services. Job assistance and training could be categorized as a type of experience that adds to a person's sense of self-efficacy or mastery. Greater feelings of self-efficacy or mastery are associated, especially among African-American men, with reduced feelings of depression (Mizell, 1999), which may include hope for the future. Therefore, continued efforts to address fathers' sense of hope for the future through program content and referral to other job training and mental health services are warranted, as are studies of predictors of hope for the future among noncustodial fathers.

### **Limitations**

This study has notable limitations. First, our measurement scale items related to fathers' hope and role salience are not as detailed as we would like. Although statistically reliable, the scales contain only a few items that refer to relatively general constructs within each area. Thus, our suggestions refer only to broad initiatives within RF programs instead of specific skills or fathering role development that may be important to participants. Future analyses might benefit

from a more detailed assessment of parenting and role salience that was not afforded by the current instruments. For example, a measure of role salience that is specifically tailored to men and fathering may be more appropriate. The current study was part of an initial evaluation of an RF program and fathers were not compensated for participation in the study. Research support in the future may allow for more detailed assessments and compensation to research participants for their time investment.

Second, we note a limitation in the measurement of our outcome of interest. Although intentions to behave a certain way are necessary precursors to real action (Ajzen, 1985, 1991), they are an indicator of more objective RF programming outcomes. Gaining access to data on actual child support payments would add validity to the suggestions developed from the current results. Future study might include both intentions and actual payments as indicators of programming outcomes rather than simply relying on intentions.

Finally, although fathers were informed that their participation in the research study was not linked to their access to RF programming services, it is possible, as with any program evaluation, that social desirability bias may have influenced some of the outcomes of our results. In addition, effective facilitators create a kind of bond with participants. Thus, fathers may also have felt compelled to respond favorably to not jeopardize the careers of their helpers. Social desirability may also be a factor in reporting intent to pay child support. However, our assessment focused on change in this variable rather than the level of intent.

### **Conclusion**

Despite the noted limitations, the present study adds practical information to a small evidence base of RF program effectiveness. We emphasize the link between outcomes related to RF program content on fathers' attitudes and skills, as well as hopefulness and their association with enhanced child support compliance intentions. This represents more of a study of the process of change compared to the more typical assessment of change in a list of possible program outcomes of RF programs. Programs seeking to increase compliance with child support agreements are well-advised to simultaneously address parenting and financial or job-specific outcomes. It seems evident that it is not just fathers' practical ability to comply with child support obligations that influence their intent to pay. Maintaining a balanced emphasis on parenting and cognitive skills related to managing hopelessness in addition to job and financial assistance will contribute to the effectiveness of RF programs in promoting child support compliance.

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