



A Mile in my Shoes: An Exploration of Custodial Mothers' Perspectives on Empathy and its Role in Co-parenting and Paternal Involvement

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Abstract

In contemporary society, fewer adults marry than in previous generations. It is also true that there have been increases in the number of non-marital births. The combination of these demographic trends mean that large numbers of fathers live apart from their children and are at risk for disengagement as a result of the conflict that characterizes many co-parenting relationships. In response, there is a burgeoning literature examining interventions aimed at improving co-parenting cooperation and reducing conflict. To further examine these issues, the purpose of this study was to give voice to custodial mothers enrolled in a co-parenting intervention to share their experiences and perspectives on their relationships with their children's fathers and to offer their opinion regarding the most impactful components of the intervention. In-depth qualitative data were collected from 55 custodial mothers participating in focus groups and follow up individual interviews. Data analysis revealed that many of the mothers reported improvements in their co-parenting relationships over time. The absence or presence of empathy also emerged as a salient factor in shaping the mothers' co-parenting experiences, a finding that may have implications for practitioners and researchers interested in the dynamics of family functioning.

Keywords Co-parenting · Co-parenting interventions · Empathy · Custodial mothers · Non-resident fathers

Highlights

- Qualitative research methods are useful in examining the nuances that influence parents' lived experiences in families.
- Co-parenting interventions can be effective complements to responsible fatherhood programs.
- Empathy is an important factor in shaping co-parenting.

Since the 1970s, there has been a decrease in marriage rates (Dixon, 2009; Schweizer, 2018). During this same time period, there has been an increase in the number of children born to unmarried parents (Carlson, 2020). The result of these demographic trends is that more men live apart from their children than ever before. This has led to the proliferation of fatherhood programs aimed at increasing fathers' involvement by improving their parenting skills and

economic standing (Mazza & Perry, 2017). Evaluations of many of these interventions have revealed that the quality of the co-parenting relationship plays a major role in shaping paternal involvement as non-resident fathers have to negotiate access to their children (Dion et al., 2015). Co-parenting has been defined as two or more adults who collectively take on the care and upbringing of children for whom they share responsibility (McHale & Lindahl, 2011). Co-parenting can be particularly important in families where parents are divorced, separated or do not co-reside and can be supportive or inhibiting. For example, in a study of maternal and child health clients, Perry et al. (2017) found that when custodial mothers were intentional about facilitating non-resident fathers' involvement, many fathers felt affirmed in their roles and worked to take more active roles in nurturing and caregiving. Contrarily, Fagan and Kaufman (2015) conducted qualitative interviews with 71

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men participating in a fatherhood program, finding that many of the men's co-parenting relationships were characterized by maternal gatekeeping and undermining behavior that limited fathers' access to their children. In response to these types of co-parenting challenges, practitioners began implementing interventions designed to facilitate amicable relationships between fathers and mothers, as well as shared decision making, parenting time (formerly known as visitation), and equitable division of labor.

Co-parenting Interventions for Divorced Parents

Issues impacting co-parenting such as child support and parenting time are automatically built into divorce proceedings. Therefore, most co-parenting interventions have enrolled formerly married participants. Bonach conducted a series of studies to determine the effectiveness of a court ordered co-parenting intervention for parents filing for divorce in western Pennsylvania between 1996 and 2001. The studies collected data from a sample of 135 (54 males and 81 females) parents who were provided with a one time, 2.5-h seminar designed to educate and sensitize parents to the needs of their children and to improve their communication. Bonach's (2005) regression analysis revealed that satisfaction with child support arrangements, less hostile divorce proceedings, and forgiveness were the strongest predictors of high-quality co-parenting. Bonach et al. (2005) analysis found that women were significantly more satisfied than men with their child custody arrangements and that men were more likely than women to report arguments about visitation. Fackrell et al. (2011) meta-analysis found that divorcing parents' education programs most often included middle class white samples between 31 and 40 years old participating in interventions lasting between 4 and 9 h. Moreover, the authors concluded that the interventions were generally effective, yielding significant but moderate effect sizes for reducing interparental conflict. Since then, there have been several more evaluations of co-parenting interventions for divorced parents including court based, as well as online interventions (Ferraro et al., 2016). Braver et al. (2016) compared the Parent Conflict Resolution (PCR), a lecture and video intervention, to the Family Transitions Guide (FTG), which featured motivational interviewing and didactic activities, both of which were delivered in 3-hour workshop sessions. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the interventions and data collection included pre-test and post-test data collection waves. Results revealed better outcomes for the PCR intervention including better co-parenting relationships and higher reports of father contact with children. McIntosh and Tan (2017) investigated the Young Child in Divorce and

Separation program, an intervention that included mediation and a co-parenting handbook. Its evaluation produced favorable results relative to the control group on co-parenting acrimony, co-parenting cooperation, and mediated parenting plans.

Co-parenting Interventions for Never Married Parents

Although divorcing couples are more likely to be referred to co-parenting interventions (Pearson, 2015), co-parenting interventions for never married parents have become more prevalent. Like those for divorcing parents, co-parenting interventions for never married parents aim to reduce conflict and improve communication. However, they differ in that some serve to facilitate paternity establishment and child support compliance (Ruhland et al., 2016) while others only enroll one parent (Fagan et al., 2015). Marczak et al. (2015) evaluated the Co-Parent Court program, a 12-h education and case management intervention, to determine its effectiveness in helping unmarried parenting improve their co-parenting relationship and increase fathers' involvement with children. Data analysis from 542 parents who enrolled revealed that mothers were more than 4 times more likely than fathers to complete the program. Moreover, the results also indicated that the program positively impacted mothers' report of the co-parenting relationship and fathers' involvement with their child. Other research has focused on findings from the Figuring It Out for the Child (FIOC) program. FIOC is a six session dyadic intervention administered by a faith based community organization offered to co-parenting couples during the mothers' third trimester. McHale et al. (2015) pilot test of FIOC collected data from 20 families, 14 of which demonstrated positive outcomes, 3 did not improve, and 3 declined over time. Overall, the results indicated declines in co-parental conflict and destructive interpersonal dynamics and improvements in rapport and problem-solving communication with moderate to large effect sizes. Salman-Engin et al. (2017) also analyzed data from the FIOC dataset and found that parents reported high levels of satisfaction with the intervention and exhibited statistically significant improvements on multiple measures of family functioning at 3–4 months follow up.

In sum, a review of the existing literature reveals that a growing number of co-parenting interventions have been offered as a response to the demographic trends away from traditional, married, two-parent co-residential families. These interventions have been tailored to meet the unique needs of both divorcing and never married parents. The co-parenting literature also indicates that several factors are associated with reports of co-parenting relationship quality. These include forgiveness and perceived network disapproval

of the co-parent (Visser et al., 2017), gender role orientation differences (Doyle et al., 2014), the assignment of blame for the relationship's dissolution (Bonach, 2009), fathers' financial contributions (Goldberg, 2015), child temperament (Laxman et al., 2013), and complexity stemming from multiple partner fertility (Goldberg & Carlson, 2015). Nevertheless, a defining feature of nearly all co-parenting interventions is that they include content aimed at improving conflict resolution and communication skills (Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2014; Owen & Rhoades, 2012). However, less is known about the underlying causes of conflict and breakdowns in communication. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to invite custodial mothers participating in a co-parenting intervention to share their experiences and perspectives on their relationships with their children's fathers and to offer their opinion regarding the most impactful components of the co-parenting intervention.

Method

Data for this study were collected as a part of a larger fatherhood and co-parenting project funded by the Fatherhood Research and Practice Network (frpn.org). In this project, the mothers of the children of the men participating in the *4 Your Child* fatherhood program, a multisite parent education and case management intervention in the southeast, were enrolled into a brief intervention consisting of a 2-h workshop, an invitation to work with a court approved mediator to develop a co-parenting plan, as well as post workshop focus groups and follow up interviews. The sample population for this study included mothers whose child's father was a participant in the *4 Your Child* fatherhood program. To recruit mothers, announcements were made during either the second or third (of seven) fathers' workshops about the possibility of referring their co-parent to a brief educational intervention. After making the announcement, fathers were queried as to their interest in having their co-parent exposed to a sampling of the content and activities that they had or were yet to receive. Fathers expressing interest provided the name and a contact number for their co-parent. Fathers offering referrals were provided with a \$10 gift card incentive. There were some fathers who expressed an interest in keeping their participation in *4 Your Child* away from their co-parents. In those cases, the fathers' self-determination was respected and no outreach to the custodial mother was attempted. After receiving names and contact information for mothers from fathers, outreach to them was made by female project staff members using telephone calls and text messages. Mothers were excluded if they were not the custodial parent or cited concerns related to a history of possible intimate partner violence. See Perry

et al. (2020) for a full description of the co-parenting intervention.

Sample

A total of 55 mothers participated in qualitative focus groups associated with their enrollment in the brief co-parenting intervention. This sample represented 79.71 percent of the 69 mothers who enrolled in the intervention. Inclusion criteria included being at least 18 years of age, being the focal child's custodial parent and having a co-parent participating in the *4 Your Child* fatherhood program. On average, the mothers were 34.14 years old ($SD = 6.22$) and their children were 9.43 ($SD = 2.79$) years old. The mothers reported a median number of 2.00 (range 1–8) biological children who were between infants and 17 years old. The mothers also reported a median number of 2.00 (range 1–6) co-parents. The mothers reported an average annual income of \$26,321.20 ($SD = \$20,234.97$). See Table 1 for the remaining sample demographics.

Procedures

Immediately following each of the co-parenting intervention workshops, mothers were invited to participate in focus groups. The focus groups were intended to solicit more in-

Table 1 Sample frequency distributions

Variable	Category	N	%
Race	White	18	32.72
	Black	35	63.63
	Biracial	2	3.63
Relationship Status	Not married or romantically involved	29	52.72
	Married/romantically involved with 4 Your Child father	18	32.72
	Married/romantically involved with non 4 Your Child father	8	14.54
Education	Less than high school diploma	4	7.27
	High school diploma/GED	26	47.27
	College	25	45.45
Employment	Unemployed	19	34.54
	Employed, part time	7	12.72
	Employed, full time	29	52.72
Multiple Co-parents	Yes	31	56.36
	No	24	43.63

depth information from the participants regarding their parenting experiences, feedback on how to improve the workshops, and strategies they recommended that fathers and service providers should employ to increase mothers' receptivity to co-parenting. A total of 19 focus groups were conducted, 12 of which were led by the first author, an African American male holding a doctorate. The other seven focus groups were led by the second author who was also an African American male holding a doctorate. The focus groups included between two and five participants. Each of the focus groups followed a semi-structured format (see appendix A for a list of questions) and were audio recorded to ensure accuracy during transcription. On average, the focus groups lasted 47 min. Data collection spanned a total of 6 months and mothers participating in the post workshop focus groups were also invited via telephone or text message to participate in individual follow up interviews at 6 months that were conducted by the first author. These interviews served to solicit updates from mothers about their co-parenting experiences over the 6 month study span and any feedback they had to offer regarding the effectiveness of the intervention. The follow up interviews also followed a semi structured format (see appendix A) and lasted 39 min on average. Forty-nine (89.09%) of the original 55 focus group participants agreed to the follow up interviews. Of the six mothers that did not participate in the follow up interviews, one declined citing changes in her work schedule that limited her ability to meet. The other five could not be reached because their contact information changed.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed in the phenomenological approach (Creswell, 1998). These data were related to the participants' co-parenting experiences and perspectives, as well as their feedback on the intervention's strengths and weaknesses. All transcripts were analyzed using QSR International's NVIVO8 by a three person research team consisting of two African American male full-time faculty with doctoral degrees and a Hispanic female doctoral student. Per the tenets of phenomenological research (Saldana, 2021), the data were analyzed through an iterative process in which members of the research team completed a round of initial independent open coding of all the transcripts. From there, the research team met to discuss their independent codes. Similar or overlapping codes were adopted without further discussion. However, in cases where there was disagreement, the research team discussed the proposed codes and supporting excerpts from the transcripts to come to consensus about the importance and label for the remaining codes. Subsequently, the research team engaged in a collective axial coding process to group the open codes

into agreed upon categories. This process continued until the team determined that no new codes were emerging. From there, the most salient themes were identified with a focus on finding significant statements within the text of the focus group and interview transcripts. Those statements were then grouped into meaning units describing the mothers' co-parenting experiences and perspectives on the effectiveness of the intervention. To uplift the mothers' voices, the following section features a synthesis of the most salient emergent themes and selected illustrative quotes serving as representative of the mothers' experiences.

Results

Data analysis revealed that empathy played an important role in shaping both the mothers' perspectives on their co-parenting relationships and their opinions of the most salient components of the intervention. In sharing their narratives, themes related to the absence or presence of empathy emerged. The emergent themes related to the absence of empathy were titled *Walking a Mile* (mothers expressing frustration with fathers' lack of knowledge related to the effort required in raising children) and *His and Hers Parenting* (mothers discussing the differences in their caregiving obligations vis-à-vis their children's fathers). Contrarily, at the conclusion of the 6-month study period, several of the mothers' narratives included discussions suggesting that their co-parenting relationships were impacted by the intervention and were characterized by increases in empathy. These themes were titled *Drawing the Short Straw* (mothers rejecting other mothers' maternal gatekeeping behavior), *Props to the Program* (mothers discussing how the intervention increased fathers' empathy), and *Woman in the Mirror* (mothers discussing how the co-parenting intervention increased their empathy for their children's fathers).

Walking a Mile

Immediately following each of the co-parenting intervention workshops, mothers were invited to participate in focus groups. The purpose of these focus groups was to solicit the mothers' perspectives on their co-parenting experiences, as well as their feedback regarding the intervention workshop. In sharing their experiences, 43 of the 55 (78.18%) mothers expressed frustration that was grounded in the challenges associated with their co-parenting relationships. Much of this frustration was born out of mothers' beliefs that their co-parents did not have enough knowledge, skill or experience with their children to be good parents. In some cases, the inexperience was a function of the fathers' non-

custodial and non-resident status. In other cases, regardless of resident status, mothers framed fathers' inexperience as a function of fathers' willingness to leave mothers with a disproportionate amount of the caregiving responsibilities. Illustrative of this sentiment is the following quote from one of the study participants. In response to being asked what she thought fathers and agencies working with fathers should do to improve co-parenting relationships, a 34-year-old, unmarried mother of three offered:

Understand that raising children by yourself is not easy. And so, when we're frustrated and really don't want to talk to you or we kinda short with you, it's just because we have so much going on. When you're not here, we are the doctors, the nurses, the mother, the cook, the cleaner, the transportation. And I just think that, if fathers kinda understood that you [non-resident fathers] have more downtime to yourself than we do. So by the time you get to us with your request, we kinda looking at you like, 'No. You don't get to come in here with requests. Ask me what you can do for us and then, give me your request.' So I feel like if they try to understand what we go through on a daily, then it might make it a lot better. So what should agencies looking to serve families do, to get the fathers improve their relationships with the mothers? Just, like I said, aid them in the understanding... Like you said, walk in our shoes a little bit, you know? Have your day fueled by other stuff that you can't control, that has nothing to do with you. You have to take care of everybody else and everything else and then maybe, they'll start coming around. And it won't be just, 'Oh, they're nagging.' or, 'They just don't want me to see my child.' It'll be, 'I understand it's not about me.'

Here, the mother is lamenting fathers' lack of understanding of what all is involved in being a primary caregiver. She then connects fathers' lack of understanding to mothers' frustration which is often manifested in fathers' accusation of nagging and gatekeeping. In detailing these connections, she references one of the workshop modules titled, *Walking a Mile in Her Shoes* as a way to begin to remedy the situation. In this module, participants are provided with content on effective co-parenting designed to help parents better understand each other's perspectives. Given the disproportionality that characterizes their current co-parenting arrangement, a more empathic and egalitarian division of labor was an aspiration of many of the mothers.

Similarly, another participant, a 32-year-old unmarried mother, shared that to better understand mothers, fathers should experience mothers' schedules complete with the

responsibility of balancing all of their children's appointments and events.

In my eyes, I feel like breaking down a mother's schedule from sun up to sun down because if you're not living with that child and you don't have custody of that child full time you can never sit there and say I understand what you going through. So I feel like every father should encounter a week of not reaching out to the mother, doctor's appointments, or when the school calls, or when the child is sick. I feel like they should have a full breakdown of what it consists of to being a mother. I don't think some of them get it. I think some of them feel like okay, the material things is it. Yeah, so then they can see how they interact with them and tell them to sit down and how to deal with them on a regular basis... And it'll probably give them a better understanding of what a mother really go through... Cause them just hearing it. It's going in one ear and out the other.

In this quote, the mother recommended adding an experiential component to the co-parenting intervention in which fathers assume the role of full-time custodian for their children for a week without the benefit of seeking assistance from mothers. In doing so, according to the mother, fathers would be forced to feel what mothers feel and experience what mothers experience because as presently constituted, the exclusively psychoeducational nature of the intervention can be more easily dismissed, "going in one ear and out the other."

His and Hers Parenting

Closely related to mothers' frustration from what they deemed to be fathers' lack of parenting knowledge and experience was the theme titled, *His and Hers Parenting*. Like *Walking A Mile*, from the mothers' perspectives, this theme centers on a lack of understanding and empathy on the part of the non-resident fathers. However, it is distinguished by the fact that *His and Hers Parenting* is more about mothers' belief that fathers are willfully inconsistent and selfish in their refusal to make the type of personal or occupational sacrifices that have come to define mothers' parenting. Thirty-nine (70.90%) of the 55 mothers expressed experiences consistent with this theme. For example, in the following quote, a 32-year-old unmarried mother with two children shares a story that she uses to illuminate the differences between her and her child's father.

He's on public transportation right now so the excuse is, travel time. Getting from work to a meeting point and then a visit. So that's it, and then he leaves... And

when you look at it like that, his plate is kind of full, when you really do look at it like that. I mean you go to work, there's a lot of travel time just getting to work. Then getting from work to see your kids, but then you need to get home... I understand that, but my plate is full too, so whatever you need to do, make it happen because I'm over it. We're over three years in and, I'm over it... In his heart of hearts, he knows he's lacking. But on the sense that he's going to say that he's a good father but if you dig deep, he'll get emotional, knowing that he ain't where he need to be and stuff like that.

In this quote, the mother reveals that although she does not doubt the veracity of her co-parent's claims about the difficulty he has in making it to visits because of his transportation challenges, she still feels he is making excuses for not being more active in his child's life. To make this point, she highlights the juxtaposition between her commitment and her co-parent's commitment as she says that her plate is also full, suggesting that if it were her, she would make it to the visits regardless of the barriers.

Another study participant, a 34-year-old mother of four who reported being romantically involved with her co-parent, goes a step beyond the mother discussing her co-parent's excuses for missing visits. To be specific, as a part of her response to being asked about what makes a good father, she takes issue with the double standard that her child's father has created regarding the necessity to be responsive to communication and outreach.

I think a good father is a everyday father. He's involved because we have to be everyday mothers. So the goal is if you gotta work, if you got another relationship, or if you have personal obligations you still connect with your child each day. You still make your time available for what's important. Different things that change in your child's life you're still there for. You're making graduation even though you gotta work, you're making birthday celebrations even though you have another obligation somewhere else. You make those things happen as a parent every day because that's what mothers have to do. So to me that's a good dad. You make a sacrifice on your time for your child...Make it about the kids and making a vow [of] availability. My experience with my child's father is he wants me to have my phone wide open available, keep my friends on hold and I can't expect that same thing for him. I think the availability and the expectations that he has of me should be the same for him. If I gotta answer my phone when you call 'cause then that gets turned into you trying to keep my child from me. My child was using my phone to call you

and we go to the voicemail we can't talk about that. We can't always get to your line but we gotta be available. Otherwise we keeping your child from you.

Here, the mother draws on her experience as a custodial parent and primary caregiver as she describes a good father as an "everyday" father, one who is willing to make sacrifices to maintain an active presence in his child's life. She then laments her co-parent's expectation that she always be available to him to facilitate his involvement on his terms with no reasonable expectation that he would reciprocate if and when needed. As she ends, the mother mentions how not only does she have to put up with the unfairness associated with the double standard about availability, but failing to do so places her and other custodial mothers at risk of being accused of discouraging fathers' involvement.

Finally, an unmarried, 34-year-old mother of two children reflects on her experiences with her co-parent as she expresses frustration that he does not take the initiative to independently think about his child's needs the way that she does. Moreover, she goes on to talk about his unwillingness to adjust his schedule to take care of any of their child's caregiving responsibilities. In doing so, the mother talks about how when her child's father refuses to adjust his schedule, she is essentially forced to adjust or reconfigure her own schedule, further exacerbating the disparities in their division of labor. At the end of quote, she provides feedback on how to improve the intervention as she suggests helping men to better understand what mothers have to deal with as it relates to the rigors of parenting.

But for me, what goes to being that great dad is after your basic needs are met, then it's like, your next thought is, what is it that I can do to make my child's life a little bit better? What can I do to help my child out more? Not, I don't care about helping me out necessarily, it's... comes to my mind, I'm constantly thinking about what it is that needs to be there for my children. We have tutoring, we have sports activities, I have to go to classrooms. I have children with a disability issue. So my schedule is constantly going around my children...I try to come up with a schedule, and we went along with the schedule until it got altered; missing weekends, missing hours, alternative places to meet. So it just kind of didn't work after a while. I feel like his time in his mind is more valuable than mine. I have to adjust. My child gets sick, I leave work. Something happens to him, it's, 'Oh I can't do it 'cause I gotta work.' I be having to work too. I make adjustments in my schedule. You can't do it? It's always when something comes up for him, it's a no-go, period, point blank. When I'm like, 'Hey I need you to take her to a doctor.' 'Well, I can't

do it.' It was always me. I gotta do it. I gotta adjust. I gotta be flexible. So it was when he couldn't do something, I had to adjust, I had to be flexible, I had to reschedule. It was never the other way around. And I feel like they're looking at us as being controlling, but it's not that we're being controlling. It's just that we're gonna handle the business regardless...So maybe giving them coping skills so they can figure out what women deal with. 'Cause like I said, when my daughter's sick, I'm taking off work. When it's a doctor's appointment, I do this, I do that. When it's... she's acting out, I leave work. So think about all I lose out on because I'm the only provider. Where do you fit into this? So teach them, this is the whole list of what falls on the mother. What can you alleviate? What part of this on her side should be your responsibilities too? And even if not, you're alleviating it and taking it off of her. What can y'all balance? What responsibilities should y'all share?

As indicated in the preceding quotes, analysis of focus group data revealed that at the time of their participation in the intervention workshop, many of the mothers' co-parenting relationships were strained due to a lack of empathy. According to these mothers, this lack of empathy was exhibited in several ways including the fathers' lack of parenting knowledge and skills, as well as their inability and unwillingness to make the necessary sacrifices to prioritize their roles as caregivers to their children.

In addition to the focus groups immediately after the mothers' co-parenting workshops, we also conducted individual follow up interviews with mothers 6 months post intervention. The purpose of these interviews was to check in with the mothers to determine the effectiveness of the intervention and to have them share their perspectives on the trajectory of their co-parenting relationship since they participated in the workshop and their child's father participated in the fatherhood program. Therefore, the follow up interviews also served to provide a more nuanced perspective on the nature of any changes in the participants' co-parenting relationships. Consistent with mothers' quantitative reports of improvements in their co-parenting relationships and conflict resolution skills (see Perry et al., 2020) over the 6-month study period, the emergent themes from the follow up interviews centered on the changes in the parents' level of empathy. These emergent themes revealed that some mothers expressed contempt for other mothers who engaged in maternal gatekeeping, as well as describing the ways in which their co-parents' empathy was increased by their participation in the fatherhood program and how the mothers' own empathy was increased by participating in the co-parenting intervention.

Drawing the Short Straw

At the time of the 6 month follow up interviews, many of the mothers reported improvements in their co-parenting relationship quality. Much of this shift was related to increased empathy exhibited by either or both parents. In fact, 31 of the 49 (63.26%) mothers who completed 6-month follow up interviews expressed empathetic attitudes towards some fathers, especially those who they saw as being unfairly and unnecessarily prohibited from taking active roles in their children's lives because of stereotypical and presumptive narratives of custodial mothers as good parents and non-resident fathers as bad or deadbeats. For example, consider the following quote from a 35-year-old mother of two children:

Sometimes I think that a lot of that difficulty actually comes from the mom, you know? When I see drama as far as like, you know, baby daddy type drama. A lot of that comes from the mom. And I do think that dads kinda get the raw end of the deal sometimes. I'm not saying that they're perfect, but I think that society's made it a lot easier on the moms than they've made it on the dads.

In sharing her belief that society has made things easier on moms, this mother also states that fathers get the "raw end of the deal." Here, she was pointing to the fact that as primary caregivers, some mothers possess and wield disproportionate decision-making power that could be used to grant or restrict fathers' access to their children, a practice that other mothers spoke to more explicitly.

Of the mothers holding the opinion that other mothers sometimes use maternal gatekeeping as a method to restrict fathers' access to their children, most of them believed that this occurred when mothers were spiteful about the dissolution of the mother-father romantic relationship. While acknowledging that some fathers had difficulty untangling their roles as husbands, boyfriends and romantic partners from their roles as parents, many of the mothers admitted that some mothers are also unable to separate these distinct roles. As a result, jealous or scornful mothers leverage their status as custodial parents to control fathers. Consider the interview excerpt from a 50-year-old mother with two children who reported being married to a man other than the focal co-parent.

It's not about their romantic relationship, especially if you all have been separated and stuff. Because I think a lot, and then I think that's on the mothers too, because I think a lot of mothers see that the dad's doing good with the child, and they try to

bring it [romantic relationship] back. They need to keep that separated, especially if you all not already together...Just give him his child, let him take his child. Let the children go... especially with big children, if you got teenagers. Now I know some, you got little kids then that's different. You might want... but if you got a big child, 13, 14, let him take his child...I think all the men need that, spend time with their children. Especially if they're willing to. I wish more women would stop thinking it's all about financial. It's more than money. They [mothers] gotta realize that.

In this quote, the mother expresses disdain for other mothers who use their children as bargaining chips in an attempt to coerce their co-parents into rekindling an old romantic relationship or as leverage for child support. In the next quote, an unmarried 36-year-old mother also admonishes custodial mothers who use children to manipulate fathers. She even goes as far as to mention that some of her friends have done this, but that her disagreement with this behavior has compelled her to no longer associate with them.

I am a good mother. But I'm gonna be honest with you, I have matured as a mother, I have lost a lot of female friends because I don't agree with their parenting tactics. And I don't agree with, in some situations where you do have fathers who are really trying and the mother isn't necessarily doing everything that she needs to do...I think that, I really do think that you all should offer this same class to women... Yeah, because they scorned. Some women is scorned, like how they breakup... Like I said, in relationships it's hard because a woman can be scorned and so she wanna use her child to manipulate the father.

Props to the Program

Beyond empathizing with fathers by condemning other mothers for engaging in gatekeeping behavior, mothers also discussed the ways in which some fathers' empathy increased over the 6 months of his participation in the fatherhood program. For 33 of 49 (67.34%) mothers, they reported being pleasantly surprised at the changes in their co-parent's attitude and behavior. In many cases, mothers spoke openly about being frustrated by their previous co-parenting experience which contributed to their skepticism as to whether or not their co-parent would make any meaningful changes. Most often, these changes related to fathers' increased willingness to share in the caregiving

and disciplinary responsibilities. As stated by a 30-year-old mother of three children, "I've actually, I've noticed a really big change recently. I think it's because of this class, so it's really awesome what you guys are doing." In another example, a 29-year-old mother who was married to a man other than the focal co-parent stated that she learned of her co-parent's participation in the fatherhood program while he was away from home working on his sobriety. She reports that she had little confidence that the program's content and the associated attitudinal changes would be sustained. However, after participating in the co-parenting workshop and reflecting on the previous 6-months, she admits that even after her co-parent returned from treatment, he has been less critical and more cooperative.

I definitely feel like it's gotten better. Honestly, I'm surprised. I was not a believer. But he had started this program when he was in rehab, so I thought, okay, so I'm just going to be helping him take a class that he needs to keep him out of trouble. Once he got out, he came home, he was 1000 times better as a parent... Before, it was a lot of yelling, he's always right, he was always the better parent, he was the stricter parent so that must make him the better parent. Very critical of my parenting but now it's more teamwork if we have to talk about something then we talk, not talk at each other we talk, ya know, communicate better.

Perhaps the most enthusiastic of all the follow up interview respondents was an unmarried, 33-year-old mother of two children. In sharing her story, she spoke in great detail about the ways in which her child's father had become progressively more involved in the 6 months since he participated in the fatherhood program. From more positive communication to taking responsibility for their child's birthday party and providing reassurance during the child's recent tonsillectomy, the father was becoming more and more active over time. Below, she explains:

I feel like he has better responses to things I say. When I tell him, 'I struggle with this, this, that and that, you don't understand', it's not 'Well, I'm this, I'm that.' He's not talking over me. He has better responses. He might not understand me completely on how I feel but like, when we just negotiated about her birthday, she just had her ninth birthday in April. So when we negotiated about this, he's like, 'Can you help me pay for all this? I'm throwing this big ole birthday' and I'm like, 'Hey, I done did eight birthdays, bro. I'm not paying for this one. You want to do it? You're stepping up. This is your plan, execute it.'

And so that could have made anybody frustrated because hey, you know, this is his first time doing this. He's like, 'So, you don't want to participate?' I said, 'I will help you cook and that's it.' And he's like, 'Ok.' So, he worked from there. So, I feel like he might be put in some challenging positions but now he considers where I'm coming from. Like I said, he threw that whole birthday party pretty much on his own and I mean, it was hands down better than any birthday I threw, except for one, but I'd say he did great and I let him know. I wanted to give him positive reinforcement because usually I'd be like, 'Ok, you threw the birthday, whatever.' But I was like, 'Dude, you did good, where did you find that? I'm impressed. Where did you get that from? I can't believe you did it.' So, I gave him some praise because I felt like, at this point, he needed it. I mean, I'm not saying everybody always praises what I do, taking care of my kids every day but since he's stepping up and he's reevaluating himself, why don't I give him some positive reinforcement that you pulled that together on your own? You did a good job so I feel like I'm overall balanced because I can tell that makes him happy to hear that he's doing a good job and then he communicates with me better and it takes stuff off my plate because, like I said, he made a doctor's appointment and then my daughter had to be scheduled for surgery so she had to get her tonsils taken out. I am crying, I mean boohooing. He put his arm around me, he's like, 'Don't cry. Let me talk to her. Step back.' So I'm like, 'Oh, he's taking control because I just can't do it. I knew it's not that bad. I know it's just her tonsils, she's not dying, it's not a disease.' He's like, 'You know, there's other kids who get cancer. It's Ok, she's just getting her tonsils taken out.' So we've really opened up to helping each other and being involved. She had to get let out of school early. He went to pick her up so I feel like me letting loose some of the responsibilities to let him do what he can, makes everything better.

Notable here is that the mother reports that as the father took more initiative, she acknowledged his efforts, leading him to take on more responsibility. According to the mother, this virtuous cycle started with a recreational event like a birthday party and eventually began to include less conspicuous, but equally, if not more important events like scheduling doctor's appointments and providing emotional support before, during, and after the child's surgical procedure. Most importantly, the mother concludes by confirming the effectiveness of their cooperation as she states that as her co-parent became more involved, it allowed her to "let loose some of the

responsibilities" and as a result, "everything became better."

Woman in the Mirror

Finally, 31 of 49 (63.26%) of the mothers used the follow up interviews to reflect on the ways that the intervention impacted their own empathy and associated co-parenting attitudes and behavior. When this happened, it was similar to the focus group discussions highlighted in the Walking a Mile theme in which the mothers shared their frustration related to how in too many instances, they felt that their co-parents did not have an understanding or appreciation for what they as custodial parents and primary caregivers had to go through. However, rather than focusing exclusively on what they perceived as their co-parents' lack of empathy and understanding, in the follow up interviews, several of the mothers talked about how participating in the intervention led them to begin thinking about what parenting was like for their co-parents. In doing so, many of the mothers acknowledged that they had previously never considered any other perspective than their own. In response to being asked about the long-term impact of the intervention on her co-parenting relationship, a 39-year-old mother of two children, stated:

I can see some of the things where they're coming from. Like, he didn't have his father growing up and he really didn't know what it is to be a father 'cause he didn't have one in his life and stuff like that. I feel that it was important and I got a better understanding of where he's coming from.

Here, the mother describes the current nature of her co-parenting relationship as she mentions her efforts to see where the father is "coming from." She also acknowledges that he grew up without an active father, which she went on to say did not excuse or justify his inconsistency, but it did help her understand why he oftentimes appeared indecisive or deferential in his parenting approach. Similarly, other mothers discussed how the intervention helped them to exhibit more patience with their co-parents. In the following interview excerpt, a 37-year-old mother of three discusses how as a result of the intervention, she works to maintain clear and consistent communication with her child's father even at times when he is less responsive than she would like. As she shares, she mentions how this new approach is a departure from how she has responded historically.

It was very beneficial to me and I enjoyed it. I've completely changed who I am and how I raise him

[participant's child]. Even when he [participant's co-parent] decided to fall off the face of the Earth, normally my first instinct is to just say okay, that's it. I'm done. We're not doing this again. Don't call me, don't ask me for pictures. Don't do anything. But I still now just leave him messages and inform him of what's going on versus block him out of the world completely...I haven't done that in... I've kept him shut out of his world for eight years. But now I feel like it's important regardless of whether he feels it's important, you just shine a little light on what's going on so he sees the change in his child, he sees the change in the way I parent and maybe that will inspire him at some point and he'll want to get back involved with co-parenting.

As this mother details her efforts to be more patient, she also admits to having shut her co-parent out for 8 years, a pattern that both parents were looking to turn around through their participation in their respective parenting interventions. In the final illustrative quote, a 40-year-old mother reveals how the intervention prompted to her to be more open to her co-parent's point of view as opposed to looking to dispel or refute it.

Well in the sessions that I had, he pointed out something, where I was.... I could have been more open...I tend to... instead of arguing, I'll just shut myself off and not deal with the situation...I have to make myself open, so that I can hear what he's saying and then try to get my point across. But I have a tendency to ignore him and shut him out...Yes, it has been very effective. It even surprised him, just because I didn't ignore him...Yes, he's used to me ignoring him...Yeah, I think when I first started actually listening to him and not just being like 'whatever' and checking out. We do still have our disagreements where we argue, but it's not as much as it was before...So, I think because I am more open it's causing him to be more open, so we are communicating better as co-parents.

Here, the mother is reflecting specifically on the communication module that encourages participants to assume an open-for-change stance rather than one that signals defiance or aggressiveness. Of particular importance is that she mentions the reciprocity that is created by her exhibition of patience and understanding as she reports that "it's causing him to be more open" as well. In many ways, it is this type of positive synergy that the intervention aims to manufacture. Therefore, it is encouraging that many of the mothers recognized the ways in which increases in their empathy could serve as a catalyst for the type of mutually

affirming and cooperative co-parenting that many of them desired and previously tried to facilitate.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to lift up the voices of custodial mothers as they shared their experiences and offered their opinions regarding the most impactful components of a co-parenting intervention. The data were collected from mothers participating in focus groups and follow up interviews in connection with their enrollment in a brief co-parenting intervention featuring an educational workshop and an opportunity to develop a co-parenting plan with their child's father facilitated by a court approved mediator. Data analysis revealed that the absence or presence of empathy was pivotal in shaping the way that the mothers experienced their co-parenting relationships. The emergent themes were split between the focus groups immediately following the mothers' workshops that were characterized by frustration from mothers at the lack of empathy on the part of fathers and the 6-month follow up interviews that took on a much more encouraging and enthusiastic tone for many of the mothers. To be specific, the overwhelming sentiment expressed by the mothers during their intervention workshop and subsequent focus groups was disillusionment with fathers' lack of knowledge related to the effort required in raising children, the differences in their caregiving obligations vis-à-vis their children's fathers, as well as the fathers' seeming unwillingness to balance out the disproportionality. These findings are consistent with those of previous studies such as Markham and Coleman's (2012) analysis that concluded that one of the primary factors in continuously contentious co-parenting relationships was mothers' report of fathers' irresponsible parenting and the Petren et al. (2017) finding that mothers' parenting stress was associated with co-parenting conflict.

However, at the 6-month follow up, many of the mothers reported that there had been changes and improvements in their co-parenting relationships. The defining feature in these improved relationships was the increase in empathy including mothers rejecting other mothers' maternal gatekeeping behavior, mothers discussing how the intervention increased fathers' empathy and mothers discussing how the co-parenting intervention increased their empathy for their children's fathers. These results were consistent with previous research concluding co-parenting interventions can contribute to improvements in relationships over time (Stolz et al., 2017), but were contrary to studies concluding that the presence or quality of a romantic relationship (Goldberg & Carlson, 2015) or child support arrangement (Russell

et al., 2016) between mothers and fathers were the salient factors in shaping their co-parenting. Instead, the findings revealed that the improvements in mothers' reports of the quality of the co-parenting relationship were grounded in the fathers increased engagement with their children, likely resulting in either a real or perceived decrease in the disproportionate parenting burden that caused so much frustration reported in the earlier focus groups. This is similar to the Gürmen et al. (2017) finding that divorced mothers reported better co-parenting when their ex-husbands reported ongoing involvement, as well the Perry et al. (2017) finding that many never married mothers worked to facilitate involvement from their child's father as a strategy to reduce their own parenting burden.

In explaining the lack of empathy that the mothers reported in the intervention focus groups, it is important consider the nature of and circumstances surrounding their co-parenting relationships. According to the mothers, their co-parenting relationships had been fraught with an absence of empathy for quite some time. In fact, some of the mothers, particularly the never married mothers, indicated that from their perspective, there had never been much co-parenting cooperation, resulting in them bearing the overwhelming majority, if not all of the caregiving responsibilities. In response, several of the mothers reported that the absence of empathy manifested itself in frustration, anger, and resentment, leading many of them ignore or marginalize their co-parents. Some went as far as to admit to engaging in gatekeeping designed to exclude or truncate fathers' involvement.

At the end of the 6-month study period, many of the mothers reported substantial improvements in their co-parenting relationships. In the time between the intervention focus groups and follow up interviews, the fathers were independently participating in their own intervention where they received content that encouraged them to seek out and understand the experience and perspective of their co-parent. Since the mothers' workshop was focused on exposing them to the same content as the fathers, they were also prompted to begin thinking about the fathers' experiences. Armed with their newfound knowledge of what fathers were learning, mothers were well positioned to recognize and understand the impetus of any changes they saw in fathers' behavior. In fact, mothers often wanted to know more about what the fathers were learning than could fit into their workshop. When this happened, they were encouraged to inquire directly with the father to review their workbook exercises and role play curriculum activities to practice the skills that they learned. To whatever extent this happened, increases in fathers' empathy and any resulting increases in their level of involvement would likely

explain the mothers' report of improved co-parenting, including the reports of increases in their own empathy.

Limitations

There are limitations that should be considered in assessing the study's findings. First, immediate post workshop data were collected via focus groups and 6-month follow up data were collected via individual interviews. Although this allowed for mothers to share information and feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention during the post workshop focus groups and focus exclusively on their own co-parenting experiences over the course of the study period during the follow up individual interview, this approach may have some limitations that should be noted. To be specific, while the focus group format could create a synergy facilitating discussion and feedback, it could lead to groupthink making it less likely that a participant would share an alternate experience or perspective. Moreover, although the interview at follow up would allow the participants to focus on their individual experiences, it also meant that data collection would be limited to what mothers could recall and articulate on their own. The next limitation is that the data analysis does not account for fathers' perspectives. Given the contentious nature of some of the co-parenting relationships, the exclusive reliance on mothers' report increases the possibility of receiving socially desirable or self-serving responses. Not having fathers' perspectives also precluded the authors from any opportunity at triangulation. Another limitation was that there was no direct measure of empathy, nor were there focus group or interview questions specifically dedicated to the concept of empathy per se. Rather, the centrality of empathy in shaping the mothers' reports of their co-parenting relationships was inferred based on the discussion and transcripts of the focus groups and interviews. Finally, data were collected on the mothers' marital and relationship statuses. However, for those who were single or not romantically involved with the father enrolled in the fatherhood program, no data were collected on how long it had been since they were romantically involved. This should be taken into account when considering the possibility that some of the increases in empathy could be connected to mothers adapting and normalizing the co-parenting arrangement, particularly if the original divorce or separation was difficult.

Implications

Despite the limitations, the findings from this study have implications for clinicians and researchers working with families, particularly those with divorced or unmarried

parents. The finding that empathy was pivotal in defining the participants' co-parenting experiences suggests that clinicians should account for its absence or presence as a part of their intake assessments and researchers should measure it in their evaluations. The findings from this study also suggest that co-parenting interventions should be combined with father involvement interventions (McHale & Negrini, 2018; McHale et al., 2012) so that content on managing and resolving conflict can be combined with efforts to increase fathers' involvement. More than half of the mothers in the study agreed that their primary motivation for participating in the intervention was that children having a relationship with both parents is what is best for them. These mothers also expressed interest and willingness to participate in longer, more intensive co-parenting interventions if they were available. They even suggested developing online content so the intervention could be more accessible to mothers who had transportation or childcare barriers (Perry et al., 2020). Considering these findings, community-based practitioners and program developers should be intentional about including content aimed at increasing participants' empathy for parents to better understand each other's unique parenting roles, responsibilities and challenges. In doing so, symbiotic opportunities can be created in which fathers get more access to their children to apply what they learn in fatherhood programs and mothers can benefit from the more balanced division of labor. Of particular importance when considering proposing programs is the child's age. Given the research indicating that early involvement is predictive of increased involvement in middle and later childhood (Fagan & Cherson, 2017) and the studies linking high quality co-parenting relationships to positive outcomes for children between 7 and 9 years old (Perrier et al., 2020; Umemura et al., 2015), there is reason to be optimistic about the findings of the current study because on average, the focal children were 9 years old. However, earlier intervention is preferable as agreement on parenting plans varies depending on child age because children under age 3 have unique needs and require different skills than older children (Robb, 2012). Therefore, emphasis should be placed on preparing expectant fathers or men with infants to enhance their parenting knowledge and caregiving skills. In doing so, they will be better positioned to negotiate access to their children early on which will likely lead to their subsequent involvement being encouraged and facilitated by their co-parents.

In contemporary society, fewer adults marry than in previous generations. It is also true that there have been increases in the number of non-marital births. The combination of these demographic trends mean that large numbers of fathers live apart from their children and are at risk for disengagement as a result of the conflict that characterizes many co-parenting relationships. In response, there is a

burgeoning literature examining interventions for divorced and never married parents aimed at improving cooperation and reducing conflict. The findings from this study suggest that targeting the level of empathy that mothers and fathers exhibit may play a key role in balancing the caregiving division of labor and ultimately improve co-parenting relationship quality. To advance the state of knowledge, future interventions and research should build on the findings from this study by addressing its limitations. In doing so, practitioners and social scientists will become better equipped to develop, provide, and evaluate services that effectively and efficiently facilitate mothers' and fathers' ability to co-parent in ways that are complementary and cooperative, allowing to them both to contribute equally to their children's healthy growth and development.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Research Involving Human Participants This research features data collected from human participants

Informed Consent This research was approved by the University of Louisville IRB

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Appendix A

Focus Group & Interview Scripts

Focus Group

Question	Prompt (if needed)
Describe your co-parenting experience with your child's father.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Describe your interactions with your child's father. 2. Have you made explicit and intentional efforts to facilitate your child's fathers' involvement? If so, how did he respond? If not, is there a specific reason as to why not? 3. What are your child's fathers' strengths and needs?
What does a good father look like to you?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What should a man do to get the title of a great father? 2. If you can imagine an ideal father, in what activities would he participate?

Table (continued)

Focus Group	
Question	Prompt (if needed)
What should fathers do to improve their co-parenting relationships with mothers?	
What should agencies looking to serve families do to help fathers improve their co-parenting relationships with mothers?	1. How can programs help fathers and mothers work together for the best interest of their children?
<i>Follow Up Interview</i>	
Question	Prompt (If Needed)
How have things been in your co-parenting relationship since you first enrolled in this study?	1. Have there been any changes in the way that you and your co-parent work together for the benefit of your child?
What parts of the workshop content have you found the most helpful?	1. Are there parts of the content that you use or apply to your life more than others?
What parts of the workshop content have you found to be least helpful?	1. Are there parts of the content that you have not used or found relevant to your life?
What advice do you have to researchers and practitioners interested in developing co-parenting programs?	

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