

The Building Brighter Futures Evaluation Report:

Promoting Responsible Parenting and Co-parental Cooperation among Non-custodial Parents with Child Support Orders

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Executive Summary

The Dibble Institute has facilitated the Building Brighter Futures (BBF) pilot study to evaluate the impact of the Love Notes healthy relationships curriculum on non-custodial parents with child support orders. A preliminary analysis was conducted on data obtained from the first cohort participants recruited from three child support district offices.

Participants completed assessments designed to measure self-reported behaviors and attitudes regarding parental engagement, parental contributions, child support payments, and co-parental cooperation. Participants were assessed before beginning the program and immediately after completion with an additional follow-up approximately 60 days later. One-on-one qualitative interviews were also conducted with participants to assess in-depth experiences and perceived progress while participating in the BFF project.

Preliminary results of quantitative analysis suggested that the program was effective at promoting child care contributions and promoting parental engagement when comparing pretest and posttest reports. Participants also showed progress in regards to skills and knowledge associated with sexual planning and decision-making, conflict management, and healthy relationship building. Although pre and posttest comparisons suggested improvements in parental engagement and child support compliance there were declines in overall parental contributions. Qualitative analyses also revealed promising results as participants consistently reported favorable reviews of the program content, quality of instructor facilitation skills, and peer group interactions. Participant also consistently reported improvements in their relationships with their co-parents and children.

Participants shared aspects of the program that they would have liked changed, including expanding the diversity of group members, being allowed to bring their co-parents into sessions, and providing additional time to cover more topics. Results suggests that non-custodial parents, their co-parents and Child Support Services can benefit from an expansion of the BBF pilot given the preliminary results highlighted in this evaluation.

Introduction

The Building Brighter Futures (BBF) pilot initiative represented an attempt by The Dibble Institute to examine and identify best practices aimed at promoting responsible parenting among young non-custodial parents. With the support of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and Los Angeles County Child Support Services, the BBF pilot was developed to assess the impact of an evidence-based healthy relationship curriculum (Love Notes) on key parental outcomes among non-custodial parents. The following document will describe the rigorous methods, analysis plan, and preliminary results of the BBF pilot in an effort to contribute to the knowledge base regarding effective practices to promote responsible parenting, and co-parenting cooperation within fragile families.

Methods

The ongoing methods used in the BBF pilot were comprehensive as it entailed the use of an evidenced-based curriculum while including a protocol calling for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. The curriculum, as well as the methods used for the evaluation, will be described below. First, the Love Notes curriculum used for the BBF project will be outlined. Second, the rationale and theoretical assumptions behind applying the Love Notes curriculum to the goals of the BBF pilot will be described. And finally, the target population, study design and procedures will be presented followed by a summary of the data collection and analysis plan.

Love Notes Curriculum Description

The Love Notes curriculum, which was designed to help young adults make healthy relationship and sexual decisions, represented the core content of the Building Brighter Futures Pilot. Love Notes is an adaptation of the Relationship Smarts PLUS program which has been recognized as an evidenced based program in the National Registry of Evidenced-based programs Practices by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) (SAMSHA, 2012). The curriculum consisted of 13 instructor led group lessons that provided;

- A realistic context for learning that incorporates language, values and scenarios relevant to young parents.
- An appeal to aspirations that helps youth to cultivate a personal vision for love, intimacy, and success.
- New motivations for behavioral change, such as exploring, from a child's perspective, the impact of unplanned pregnancy and unstable relationships.
- Empowerment to achieve healthy relationships through both knowledge and practical skills.

The Love Notes curriculum uses videos, music, and interactive exercises to engage youth in learning topics focusing on;

- Self-awareness: personality style, baggage, and future expectations.
- Forming and maintaining healthy relationships
- Frameworks for assessing relationships and making healthy decisions
- Recognizing and responding to unhealthy and/or dangerous relationships
- Effective communication and conflict management skills
- Making responsible relationship choices associated with intimacy and sexual behavior
- Consequences of unhealthy relationships on children (The Dibble Institute, 2012).

Previous evaluations of the Love Notes curriculum have found it to be effective at increasing knowledge regarding healthy relationship building, conflict management, and violence prevention among young adults (Kerpelman, 2009, 2010).

BBF Pilot Rationale and Adaptation

Although the Love Notes curriculum was designed primarily to promote healthy relationships, the BBF pilot aimed to assess its effects on parental contribution, parental engagement and co-parenting cooperation among non-custodial parents. In addition to the core content of the Love Notes curriculum, the BBF incorporated a child support educational workshop led by representatives from Child Support Services. It also included an opportunity for participants to strengthen employment prospects by offering a ServSafe™ training certification to work in food services. The rationale for the approach taken in the BBF program was based on research suggesting that improving healthy relationship skills would result in improvements in the quality of co-parenting relationships (Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009). Moreover, improved co-parental interactions was hypothesized to increase the degree to which non-custodial parents engaged in healthy relationships and responsible parenting behavior, an assumption also supported by several empirical research studies (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011; Sobolewski & King, 2005; Waller, 2012).

BBF Target Population and Study Design

Participants were recruited from three child support district offices in Los Angeles California. Participants were either referred by Child Support Service staff in person or via letter that was sent home to eligible participants. The target population for the BBF pilot was non-custodial parents between the ages of 18 and 24 who had an active child support case. A pretest posttest design was used to assess the degree to which

completion of the Love Notes curriculum, developed by The Dibble Institute, was associated with improvements in parental contribution, parental engagement, and healthy relationship skills and knowledge.

Pilot Procedures

All study activities took place at the Century Center for Economic Opportunity (CCEO) YouthBuild program site located in Lennox, California. Recruited participants completed a comprehensive survey measuring key behavioral, knowledge and skill indicators before beginning the program and immediately after completion with an additional follow-up 60 days later. All participants consented prior to completing any assessments. The groups were led by two trained YouthBuild work force development staff members (one male, one female). The Love Notes curriculum was delivered over the course of eight weeks with eight weeknight classes and an expanded class on one Saturday. Each of the weeknight sessions lasted approximately three hours with the Saturday session lasting approximately six hours. Participants were given a \$25 gift card as compensation for attending each class. Participants were also compensated for the transportation costs to and from the study site with a bus pass. At the beginning of each session participants were also served refreshments.

Measures

Several assessment scales were combined into the self-report questionnaire used in the BBF pilot. Measures and individual items were developed to assess parental contributions, parental engagement, and co-parental cooperation. Additional measures were used to assess Love Notes curriculum learning outcomes associated healthy relationships skills and knowledge.

Table 1: Parental engagement and co-parenting alliance scale summary.		
Scale	Item example	Internal consistency Pre (post) (follow-up)
Parental Contribution	“Please share the extent to which you have contributed financially to the following expenses, clothing or undergarments...	$\alpha = .84 (.87) (.93)$
Parental Contact	“In the last 30 days how often have you visited seen or spoken to your child”	$\alpha = .98 (.97) (.95)$
Parental Engagement*	...how often have you helped feed/prepare meals/bottle in past 30 days”	$\alpha = (.96) (.96)$
Co-parenting alliance*		
Respect for co-parent	“My child’s other parent and I have the same goals for our child”	$\alpha = (.90) (.90)$
Shared responsibility	“My child’s other parents helps enough with the care of our child”	$\alpha = (.97) (.89)$
Communication	“My child’s other parent and I communicate well about our child”	$\alpha = (.90) (.90)$
Co-parenting alliance	[All items]	$\alpha = (.94) (.95)$
*Co-parenting and alliance and Parental Engagement items were added to post assessments for the first cohort only. Hence comparisons could not be made between pre and posttest assessments regarding these items.		

Parental Contributions, Parental Engagement and Co-parenting Cooperation

To assess parental contributions, participants were asked to report the dollar amount of contributions they made towards the care of their child, as well as the amount of child support paid in the last 30 days. Other child support items asked participants to report the total amount of arrearages accumulated in their cases, as well as their monthly child support payment obligation. Child support compliance was also calculated by computing the proportion of the amount of reported child support paid, over the reported amount of the monthly child support payment obligation for each participant.

See Table 1 for a summary of scales and reliability coefficients based on measures of parental contribution, parental engagement and co-parenting scales. The Parental Contribution Scale was developed to assess how often participants have financially contributed to childcare needs and products including clothing, childcare, healthcare and school supplies. To assess parental contact, participants were asked a series of items regarding how often they have had contact with their children in the last 30 days. Items on this scale asked participants to report how often they visited their children or engaged their children in any general activities. Answer choices ranged from 0 “never” to 3 “often” and were averaged for each participant at all assessment points. The Parental Engagement scale included items that asked participants how often they have engaged their children in age appropriate activities to account for differences in parent-child interactions that change over the course of the child’s development. The co-parenting alliance inventory (Abidin & Brunner, 1995) was used to assess the quality of co-parental respect and co-parental shared responsibility. Participants were asked to share the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with statements such as “my child’s other parent helps enough with the care of our child” (shared responsibility) and “my child’s other parent and I have the same goals for our child” (respect for co-parent). Higher scores suggest greater co-parenting cooperation.

Scale	Item example	Internal consistency Pre (post) (follow-up)
Relationship development skills and knowledge	“I understand the importance of knowing what my partners baggage is”	$\alpha = .70 (.89) (.90)$
Sexual planning	“I define my sexual values and boundaries”	$\alpha = .93 (.87) (.84)$
Conflict management	“I am able to use calming phrases that help me calm down when I’m angry”	$\alpha = .86 (.94) (.91)$

Healthy Relationship Skills and Knowledge

Several measures were also used to assess Love Notes objectives regarding healthy relationship skill and knowledge development (see Table 2). Participants were asked to rate their skills and knowledge associated with conflict management, sexual planning, and relationship management on a scale ranging from “poor” to “excellent”. Items assessing **conflict management** were designed to assess the degree to which participants understood how to prevent, cope with, and control conflicts in their relationships. For example, one item on this scale asked participants to rate their knowledge associated with the following statement *“I am able to use calming phrases that help me calm down when I’m angry”*. Items assessing **relationship development** were designed to assess participants’ knowledge and skills regarding healthy relationships and the ability to choose partners wisely. For example, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they understood *“...the importance of knowing what my partners baggage is”*. Items associated with **sexual planning** were designed to assess participants’ knowledge associated with pregnancy prevention and responsible sexual decision-making. For instance, participants were asked to rate their knowledge associated with the statements such as *“I define my sexual values and boundaries”*. Responses on each scale of items were averaged with higher scores indicating greater skill and knowledge. All measures indicated a high degree of internal reliability

Qualitative data collection & Analysis

In order to obtain an in-depth understanding of participant experiences, learning outcomes and behavioral changes, one-on-one interviews were conducted with all members of the first cohort. A qualitative interview guide (see Appendix B) was developed to elicit in-depth data regarding;

- initial expectations of the program,
- experiences with instructors and peer group members,
- changes in knowledge and behavior regarding healthy relationships and parenting,
- benefits of participating on co-parental and child-parent relationships, and
- suggestions for future implementation.

All interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audio recorded before being transcribed. To analyze qualitative data, transcripts were reviewed to identify emerging themes and commonalities from participant reports associated with parenting, healthy relationships, and general experiences in the program.

Quantitative Analysis

To complete the quantitative analysis for this pilot evaluation, data from completed assessment were entered into an excel spread sheet and imported into the IBM SPSS statistical software program. SPSS was used to compute variables, calculate means and frequency distributions that were then used to generate descriptive statistics. Further analyses were conducted to assess pretest, posttest and follow-up differences on key variables associated with parental engagement, co-parenting cooperation, healthy relationship knowledge/skill and parental contribution. Non-parametric hypothesis tests using paired comparisons were conducted to examine differences in means and proportions.

Quantitative Results

There were a total of eight participants in the first cohort of the pilot. Six of eight completed the entire BBF program yielding a retention rate of over 70%. One participant enrolled after the first session while another completed all but the last session. Table 3 summarizes descriptive characteristics of the sample. All but one of the participants were male non-custodial parents, as one custodial mother was included in the first cohort. Average age of participants was approximately 33 as five participants over the age of 24 were allowed to participate and subsequently included in the analysis. Most of the sample identified as Hispanic with three identifying as Black or African American and with one participant reporting that they were American Indian/Alaskan Native. Most of the sample reported having a high school diploma or GED. Employment data revealed that two thirds of the sample had a part time or full time job. Most participants in the first cohort reported that they were not currently dating anyone at pretest, with the remaining three reporting cohabiting, seriously dating, or other. However, at posttest only two participants reported not currently dating anyone with the highest proportion reporting that they were dating someone exclusively. Follow-up assessments revealed a similar pattern as equal proportions of participant reported not dating anyone or seriously dating someone (37.5%). Most participants reported having one child, and a single co-parent, at all assessment points.

Table 3: Demographic variable distributions			
Variable	Count (%)		
AGE mean (SD)	32.88 (12.51)		
Race			
Black/AA	3 (38%)		
Hispanic	4 (50%)		
American Indian/Alaska native	1 (13%)		
Education			
Less than a high school education	1 (13%)		
High school diploma/GED	4 (50%)		
Associates degree or some college	3 (37.5%)		
Employment Status			
Unemployed	2 (25%)		
Employed part time	3 (37.5%)		
Employed full time	3 (37.5%)		
	Pretest Count (%)	Posttest Count (%)	Follow-up Count (%)
Housing Status			
Lives with Parents	4 (50%)	1 (13%)	1 (12.5%)
Lives with other relatives	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	3 (37.5%)
Lives with a partner/spouse	1 (13%)	2 (25%)	2 (25%)
Lives alone	1 (13%)	1 (13%)	0
Lives with friends	0	2 (25%)	2 (25%)
Relationship Status			
Not currently dating anyone	5 (63%)	2 (25%)	3 (37.5%)
Seriously dating (exclusively)	1 (13%)	3 (38%)	3 (37.5%)
Cohabiting	1 (13%)	1(13%)	1 (13%)
Other	1 (13%)	1 (13%)	1 (13%)
Number of children mean (SD)	1.63(1.06)	1.63(1.06)	2 (1.20)
1	5 (63%)	5 (63%)	4 (50%)
2	2 (25%)	2 (25%)	1 (13%)
3	0	0	2 (25%)
4	1 (13%)	1 (13%)	1 (13%)
Number of co-parents mean (SD)	1.50(1.07)	1.50(1.07)	1.88(1.36)
1	6 (75%)	6 (75%)	5 (63%)
2	1 (13%)	1 (13%)	1 (13%)
4	1 (13%)	1 (13%)	2 (25%)
*Education and employment data were collected at the 60 day follow-up only			

Table 4: Child support case (CS) data summary			
Child support measure	Pretest	Posttest	Follow-up
Average monthly CS obligation (SD)	\$460.40 (205.09)	\$438.80 (203.11)	\$327.57 (228.60)
Median CS arrears owed	\$3900	\$2600	\$2093
Average CS payments made in the last 30 days	\$276.40 (260.16)	\$264.40 (273.31)	\$208.00 (276.37)

Non-custodial Contribution Outcomes

Table 4 highlights the median child support arrearages owed, average monthly child support obligation and actual payments made in the last 30 days as reported by participants at all three assessment points. Mean monthly obligation appeared to go down from pretest to follow-up with an average reduction of \$133 between assessments. A similar pattern was observed in regards to both median arrearages and average

reported child support payments made. Median arrears were reduced at an average of approximately \$900 between assessments. Average child support payments made appeared to go down at a rate of approximately \$34 between assessments. Figure 1 and 2 present pre, posttest and follow-up comparisons of mean parental contributions made in the last 30 days. When comparing reports of average parental contribution, not including child support, average contributions were higher at posttest (\$350) compared to pretest reports (\$222) highlighting a \$128 increase in contribution after intervention completion. However parental contributions decreased at follow-up to \$214. When including child support among the five non-custodial parents who had cases, there was an average increase of \$115 in total parental contributions between pretest and posttest assessments. These contribution measures also indicated a decrease at follow-up (\$349). When comparing child support payments alone, no improvements were observed between pretest, posttest or follow-up reports. A slight increase in average child support compliance was observed when comparing the most recent assessment reports with participants reporting paying an average of 50% of their child support obligation at posttest and 57% at follow-up (see Figure 3). The average scores on the Parental Contribution Scale presented in table 4 shows a slight improvement from pretest (1.36) to posttest (1.40), followed by a decline at follow-up(1.36). Inferential analysis did not reveal any significant differences between assessment points regarding any non-custodial contribution indicators.

Figure 1: Pre, Post and Follow-up assessment comparison of average parental contribution (not including child support).

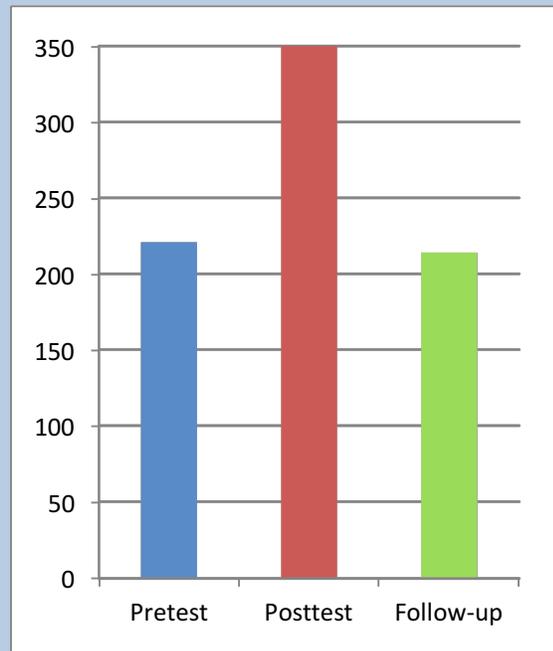


Figure 2: Pre, Post and Follow-up assessment comparison of average parental contribution (including child support).

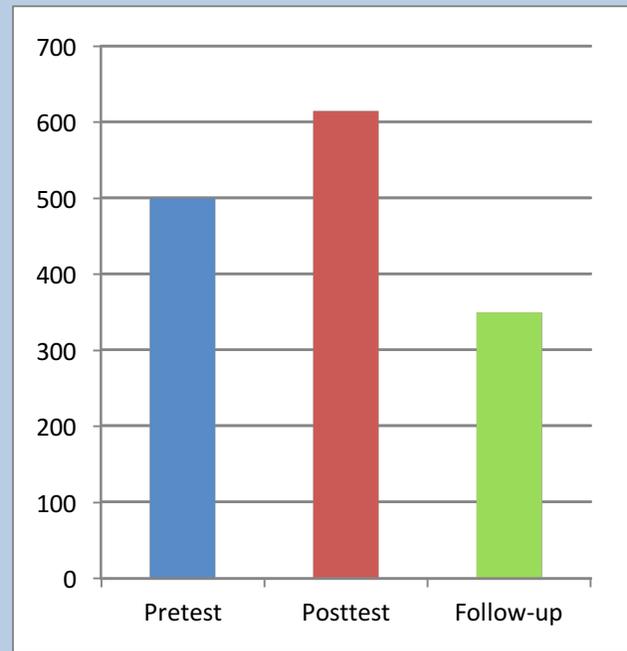


Figure 3: Pre, Post and Follow-up assessment comparison of child support compliance rate trends

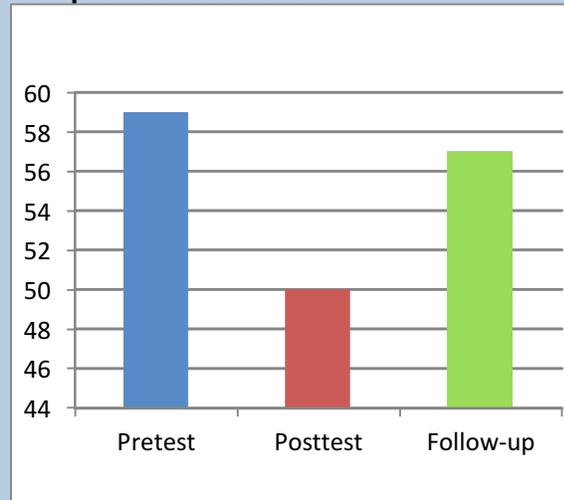
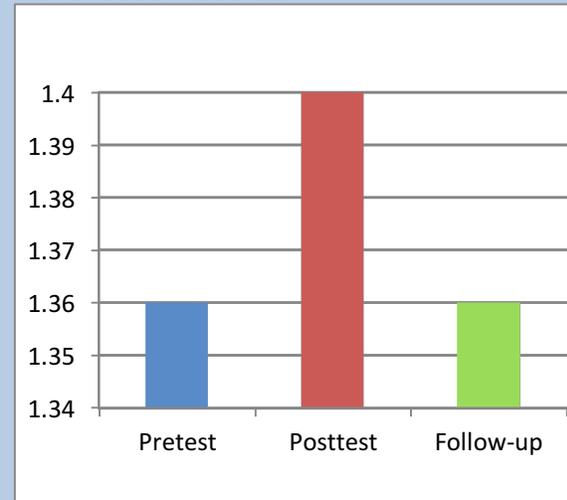


Figure 4: Pre, Post and Follow-up assessment comparison of parental contribution scores



Parental Engagement Outcomes

Results suggested improvements in parental engagement outcomes. Average parental contact scale scores at pretest were slightly lower (1.72) than those at posttest (1.83), with mean scores decreasing below pretest levels at follow-up (1.67) (see Figure 5). Although a similar pattern was observed in regards to parental engagement (see Table 6), scale score comparisons between posttest (2.66) and follow-up (3.22) did not indicate a significant difference (see Figure 6).

Figure 5: Pre and Post assessment comparison of parental contact scores

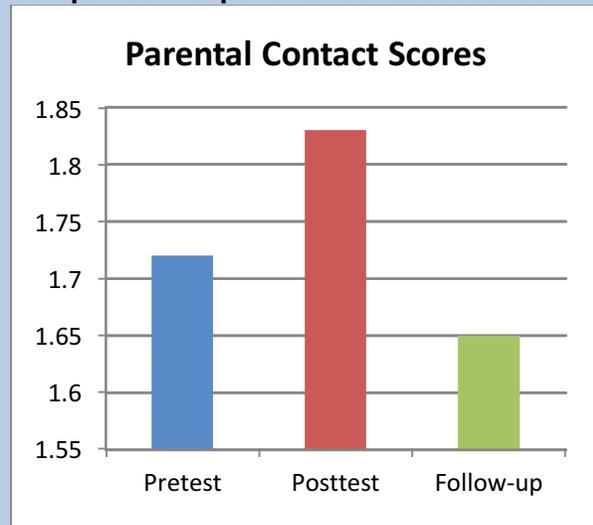
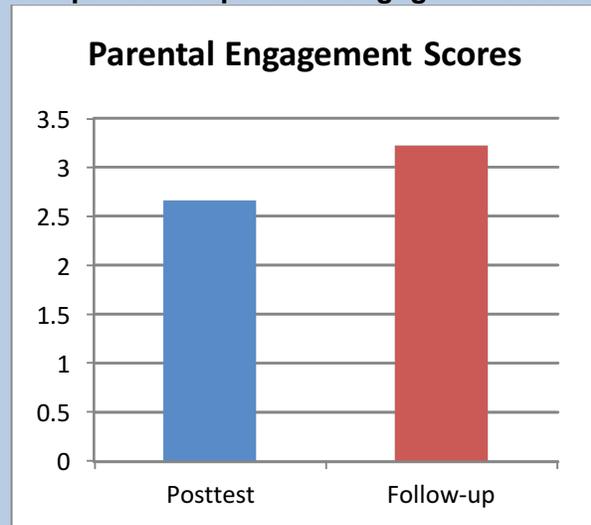


Figure 6: Pre and Post assessment comparison of parental engagement scores*



*The parental engagement scale was added after the first cohort had begun the Love Notes curriculum, hence the calculation of pretest averages were unavailable.

Co-parenting Outcomes

Figures 7 and 8 present posttest results from the co-parenting alliance inventory. Since the scale was not delivered at pretest reports, pretest posttest comparisons could not be made with these measures. However, average scores were analyzed to examine how many participants scored high on co-parenting alliance subscales after completing the program. Participants who averaged a three or better were considered high scorers as their responses represented overall agreements with statements reflecting co-parental respect and shared responsibility. Results were promising as three quarters of participants provided responses suggesting high co-parental respect and shared responsibility. The bar graph presented in figure 9 highlights average reports on individual co-parenting cooperation items. Co-parenting cooperation items asked participants their level of agreement with statements indicating positive perceptions of co-parenting interactions. Improvements were consistently observed from posttest to follow-up, but not from pretest to posttest.

Figure 7: Indicated a high degree of shared parental responsibility with co-parent on Parental Alliance scale

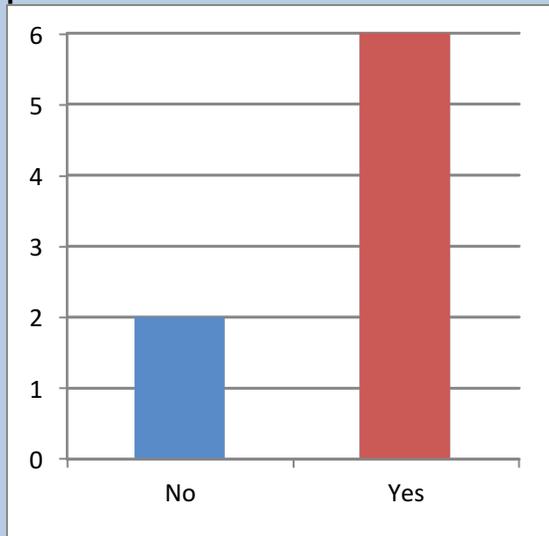


Figure 8: Indicated a high degree of respect for co-parent on Parental Alliance scale.

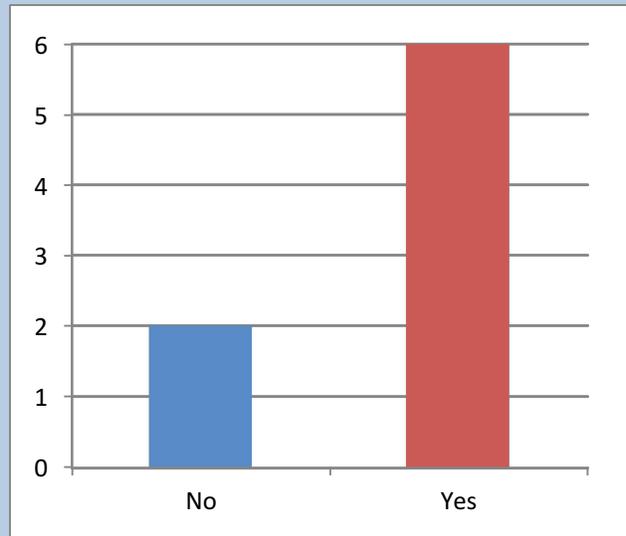
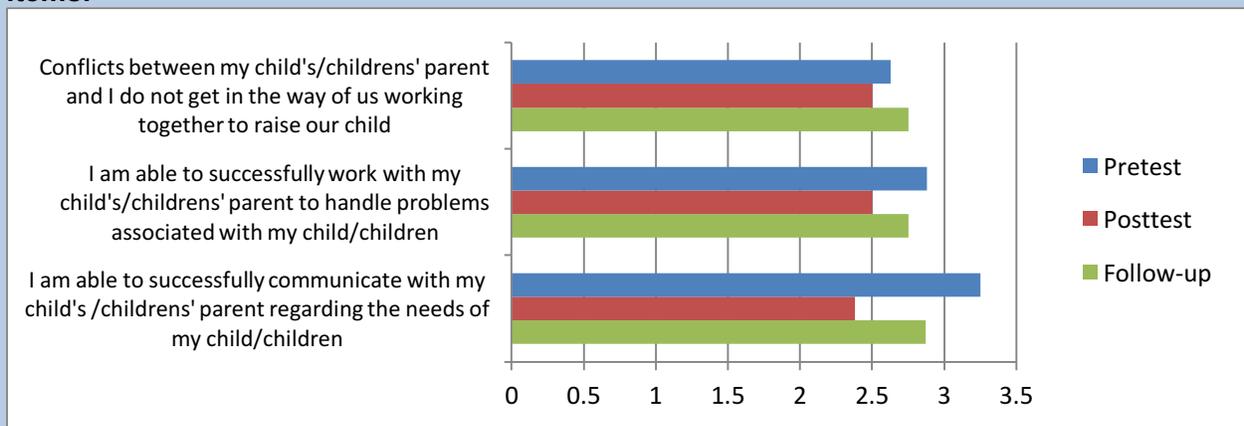


Figure 9: Pre, Post and Follow-up comparisons on individual co-parenting cooperation items.



Healthy Relationship Skill and Knowledge Development Outcomes

Changes in healthy relationship skill and knowledge were examined by comparing pretest, posttest and follow-up scores on relationship skills building, conflict management, and sexual planning and decision making assessment scales. Figure 10 highlights significant improvements regarding healthy relationship skills building with pretest reports scores averaging lower than posttest scores (2.65 vs. 3.47 respectively).

Significant improvements were also observed regarding measures of sexual planning and decision-making skills with participants averaging a score of 3.44 at posttest compared to pretest reports (2.99)(see Figure 11). Conflict management scores averaged significantly higher at posttest (3.35) compared to pretest reports (2.61) (see Figure 12). Follow-up scores on all three healthy relationship skill and knowledge subscales indicated slight decreases although average scores remained above those of pre-test assessments. Improvements in follow-up scores remained significant only for relationship skills building (3.27). No significant differences were observed between posttest and follow-up scores on any measure of healthy relationship skills and knowledge.

Figure 10: Changes in healthy relationship knowledge and skill.

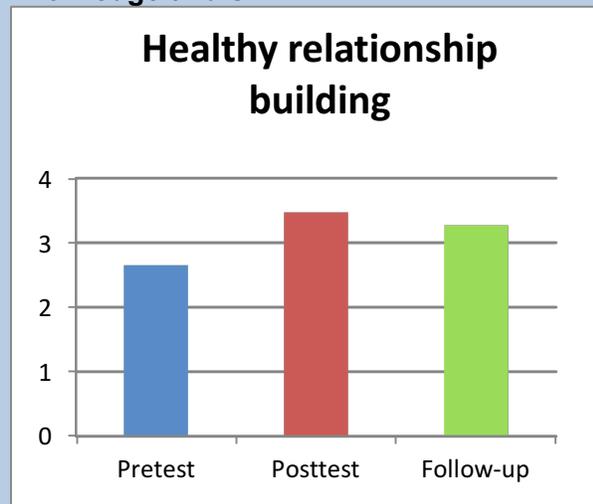


Figure 11: Changes in sexual planning and Decision-making knowledge and skill.

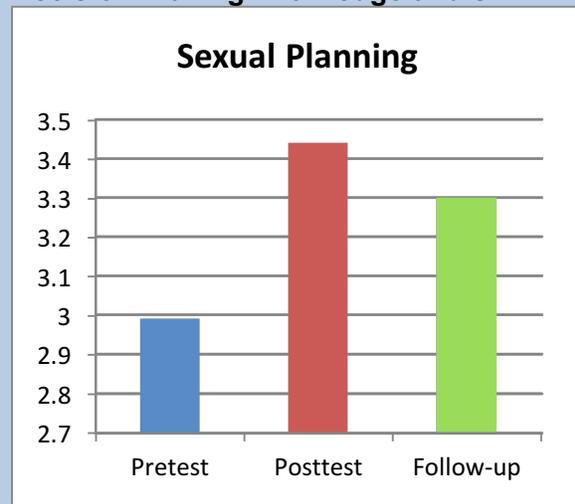
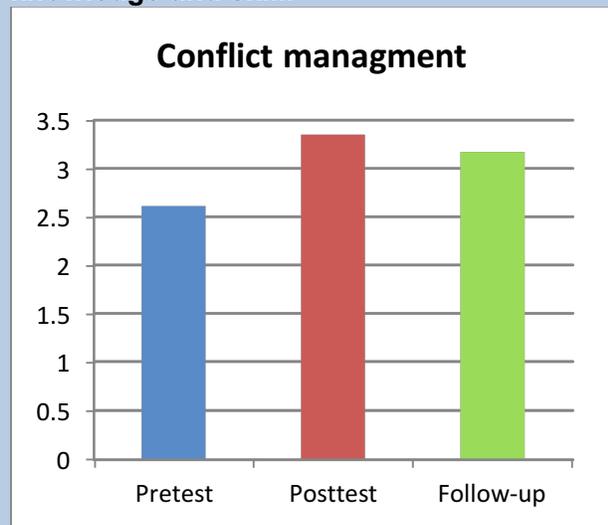


Figure 12: Changes in conflict management knowledge and skill.



In-depth Interview Results

Analysis of qualitative interviews revealed generally positive results regarding the experiences of participants and the perceived benefits of completing the BBF program. Several themes emerged from the in-depth interviews including;

- Initial impressions of the Love Notes Curriculum,
- Knowledge and skills retained by participants,
- Perceived improvements in relationships and parental abilities,
- General positive reactions to the BBF Program,
- Positive peer group interactions,
- Positive impression of facilitators, and
- Suggestions for future implementation

Themes are described below with examples taken directly from interview transcripts.

Initial Impressions of the Love Notes Curriculum

Participants' initial understanding of the specific content of the BBF program was limited before the first session. Main motivations included eagerness to obtain additional knowledge regarding their child support cases and the incentives that were provided to program participants. A quote by one participant suggested that he knew very little about child support beyond his payment requirement and assumed that this was the general understanding of child support shared among his peers. The second quote is consistent with the initial thoughts of the program held by other participants.

"...I know nothing about child support. I just know I'm on child-support and I'm paying it. And that's it. And that's pretty much what they all know. My expectations [of the program] were information, child-support information. That's pretty much it."

"... I'm paying child support and I thought it [had] something to do with that. But when I came, it was talking about life skills and the world basically. I actually thought that it was about helping you with child support...but it wasn't about that it was something different..."

Several participants were well aware of their mistakes regarding child support at the time of these interviews. These accounts suggests that non-custodial parents with child support cases represent a group that is eager for information, hence engaging them in programs and services presents an opportunity for implementing educational initiatives relevant to family support.

"I been paying child support all this time. When I had gotten laid off at my job in 2010 and I was getting unemployment they was garnishing my unemployment but they wasn't garnishing the full amount, so I kind of got behind because I didn't go report it to child support. I didn't think I had to, cause they was already

garnishing it. But they said you have to let them now because it's a computer that automatically does it."

"... I thought [the class] was something to help me better understand the child support. Because I been going through it with child support. From them taking my money, suspending my license [and] freezing my accounts. I was like well 'hey what's going on' so I thought it was a class so I could get a better understanding for child support."

"I got two kids and I get it from my daughter. I take care of my kids but you got to pay it back still. Felt like if you take care of your kids you don't have to pay all the extra money back but they want you to pay on top of it and you just gotta do what you gotta do. So I'm just now starting to actually pay it. I have two jobs, so I'm starting to pay it."

Although initial expectations were limited, participants found good reasons for returning to the program. Some reports indicated that as they learned more, they became more interested about the topics of the Love Notes curriculum, as one participant referred to it as a 'life skills' class while another saw it as a way to avoid past interpersonal mistakes. Other reports indicated that the \$25 gift card, ServSafe™ training certification, and complimentary meals were key motivating factors.

"[I] am currently single and I just want to avoid some of the pit falls that I have fallen in before in my previous relationships. So maybe this may bridge the gap between -a good relationship versus a bad relationship. So to be openly honest with you, getting a \$25 gift card as an incentive to being here, was also an added plus."

"I had no preconceived notions as to what to expect from the class. [The] \$25 gift card was the nice bait on the hook."

"The first day, it was kind of like an introduction class almost. There really wasn't that much said ...and like the second or third class... the class started getting interesting. I never actually took life skills class before. Like a actual life skills class where we talk about real life things so. It was cool."

"Is this class for real? First of all they gave me \$25 gift card which I could just really use. They're feeding us. I'm getting a ServSafe certificate for food handling and I'm thinking about food truck, which are very popular here in California. I just kind of look at it as a blessing."

"When I attended classes the first day, I was like 'ugh I don't know nobody'. But then for some reason the first activity we started doing with the notebook, I started seeing 'like okay now I kind of know what this is about'. And it's something I'm gonna try next week. And I tried next week. I liked it and I got used to it."

"I really enjoy coming. She had food for us every day. And it felt real good to me cause I was coming from work. So I didn't have time to eat. That was a plus right there."

Knowledge and Skills Retained by Participants

Participants reported learning a great deal about their behaviors, their relationships, and methods for improvement. The statements highlighted below suggest a great deal of vital knowledge that was acquired on key program outcomes.

One participant mentioned how the program changed his view of this co-parent who was preventing him from seeing his daughter. During the interview the participant reported that his co-parent has taken these measures due to his history with substance abuse. The report below illustrates his renewed perspective on his situation while participating in the BBF program.

"[I] had some type of hate towards her. But it was only because she was keeping my daughter from me. I understand now that it's not so much her. It's her protecting our daughter from me, from what I was doing. And I respect that, I respect that to the fullest and I just want her to understand that my mind was going too fast and I never took the time to stop and think about what was going on around me or who I'm hurting or who's hurting me or how I'm feeling or who's feeling what around me. And this program actually opened up a big window for me."

A similar report suggests how the program helped participants see their own behavior as factors contributing to their poor co-parenting relationships. The participant refers to a "red ball" in his response that, as the facilitator communicated, represented a partner with many problems who was generally unwilling to work on improving the relationship. The concept was introduced in the first session to begin a discussion on how to choose partners wisely. The activity appeared to have an impact on how this participant viewed himself in his relationship.

"I saw [our relationship conflicts] as [if] 'oh she doesn't respect me'. But I got to learn how I was bad. I was the one that was totally the red ball and I didn't know that until I started attending these classes. I think I still would have been a red ball if I would not have attended these. Like I was the one who didn't care. I was the one who basically messed up everything but I used to see it as 'we both did it'. But like I said I probably would have been in the same situation now if I would not have attended this class."

"It was more like, ok so I'm hanging and she'll be like 'um let's go do this' or 'let's go out to a party' or 'let's to do this and that'. And I'll be like 'oh no I don't want to do that.' It's gonna be my way or the highway in other words. Or she would be like 'oh go with me to get my nails done and my hair. She appreciates things like that. And I would be like 'No, I don't have time for you', I'll go get my haircut and buy shoes, hang out with my guys. Then we'll argue. Why? Because I wasn't able to leave my friends before. I didn't want to be with her to be honest. I just sometimes couldn't stand [my partner] but it was because I was just selfish, really selfish."

Accounts indicated that participants learned how their behaviors and relationships with co-parents impacted their children. The reports below indicated that participants did not previously consider consequences of arguing in the presence of children.

“Now I see how anything could affect my child. By not being 100% father by not doing activities with my kid or by me fighting in front of her. It could affect her big time. I didn’t know about the consequences before. Before we would just argue in front of my kid and use profanity and all that.”

“Attending these classes showed me how important my daughter is and how I have to be in her life, and the consequences if I’m not in her life. She’s probably not going to be a good student. She’s not going to be focused in school. She’s going to get hurt or she’s gonna allow other people to mistreat her because of what she sees at home or how I treated her.”

“There are exercises within the book that forced me to think about my actions my behavior, my preconceived notions about myself. And then [I] had to do [an] about face and start looking at all the wrong things that I did.”

Key skills and knowledge picked up by program participants varied as some emphasized the skills they learned in regards to problem solving, conflict management, and communication. One participant's report illustrated how the program helped him manage conflicts with his partners by taking 30 minute time outs when he was upset.

“I learned how to solve problems without using profanity. Without having anger. Without just handling situations when I'm really upset. Give [it] like 30 minutes, instead of just, you know saying something that I really don't mean and that's something that will happen between me and her a lot. We would say a lot of mean things to each other that would escalate. She would say something dumb then I would say something way more dumb and honestly I really didn't mean it. I would just get so upset at the moment. But now it's different. Now it's like I know that I won't say nothing, cause I care about her feelings now.”

Similarly, another participant explained how conflict management was pivotal to him as he would get angry communicating with his co-parents (of which he had four) while negotiating visitation over the phone. His report also suggests that conflict management may have been a challenge as it seemed in opposition to his belief that it was important to speak up and be assertive for one's children.

“One of the things we learned in the class was like when you get upset take that 30 minute breather. Go release it and come back and start it over....growing up I was always shy, would never speak up. Once you start having kids you know you have to speak up. You're an adult now you know, you gotta not only speak up for yourself, you have to speak up for you kids. I used to lash out. Now I just try to talk and if they lash, hey, I'll hang up the phone take 30 minutes and get right back and do it over again. And its peaceful, it changes and I know they noticed it too so they always ask me 'well what's wrong with you? You okay?' and I'm like 'Yeah I'm good'.”

Interview transcripts consistently suggested that participants retained a great deal of skill and knowledge regarding communication, with several identifying it as one of the

most important aspects of the program. The examples below indicate that participants did have a limited concept of communication and saw the benefits of the speaker-listener skill that was presented by the facilitators.

“From the beginning [of] my relationship I knew that communication was important. But I didn’t know the type of communication or how to use communication. I thought just that by saying what I felt and what I thought, that that was communicating. But I also understood that it goes both ways and she has to tell me how she feels and what she thinks. But that wasn’t exactly it. It was more understanding the communication than just the communication in general.

“Take your time to say things like ‘honey I hear what you’re saying’, [and] paraphrasing. She is starting to appreciate the fact that I’m listening better. I’m not just going ‘okay honey’ and just kinda blowing her off.”

“She knew that I didn’t have time to listen to her. She would tell me some kind of problem, [and I would be] listening but not hearing, I’ll zone out, or I’ll be on my phone. Now, I definitely listen to her. I don’t care about the phone, I just put it away and now we solve our problems way better. We are able to communicate way better. We are able to do a lot of things way better together instead of just fighting.”

Participants also reported learning about Child Support Services. Transcript data suggested that participants had a better understanding of child support and were generally more willing to engage with child support offices regarding any challenges that they faced. Some participants reported that they found dealing with child support easier now that they had gone through the program and understood some of the punitive aspects of child support practices as the two reports below illustrate.

“What I found out is that it’s so simple. It’s the easiest thing you could think of. It’s not time-consuming, it’s nothing. It’s a simple phone call. You get anything you want. They help you out. If anything changes, you call them they help you out with that. And I didn’t know about that formula that they use when they get the parents information. And the formula determines how much money the child gets. I didn’t know that.”

“...the [Child Support Services staff] were like ‘no we don’t touch anything of yours and unless you come and tell us’ [if] you are not working or you can’t pay or anything, if you come to an agreement with us, we don’t take anything from you. So they basically told us how the whole support system works. And why they take money away [and] why they suspend their license and everything. So, that was really good information. It was good to know. There was a lot of things that I [didn’t] know about.”

Although most accounts suggested a willingness to engage the child support system regarding challenges in paying, there was some reluctance in addressing other problems through child support. Three participants mentioned that their co-parents have refused to allow them to contact their children. Although participants saw opportunities at solving these problems through child support, some were reluctant to do so as they feared consequences to their children as one male participant suggested:

“From what I learned here is the conditions that we go by, which is how much time I’m going to spend with [my daughter], and how much time [my co-parent’s] going to spend with her. She’s going against that and from what I know, from what they showed me here, if you go against the conditions they could be penalized. But in a way I don’t want that to happen cause her mom takes care of my daughter really good. If I take that step to go to child support and actually try to get custody of my daughter it’s gonna change everything for my daughter. Like the times she spends with her side of the family and who she hangs out with, that’s going to change completely for her. And it could devastate her. I don’t know, I’m kind of in between the wall right there.”

One participant, who expressed having two failed marriages, mentioned how his attitude about relationships changed as a result of the program, as he learned skills for building healthy relationships and looked forward to using them.

“I guess I had a breakthrough. Cause my thing was like, I done been through different relationships and different things in life where I was like, you know, I’m so done with marriage. I never want to do this again. If I was to do that I know how to change my tone now. If I was to get into a relationship I would know what to look for and what to do. So I’ll definitely apply the stuff that I learned in this class to that.”

“... if I would have had this class when I was in my 20s, I wouldn’t have four kids. I wouldn’t have probably had all the relationships I went through. Probably wouldn’t have been married twice and divorced twice. I probably would have took my time. Probably would have been married once and still would have been married.”

it helped us, know what to look for and kinda build on that little foundation first as [the facilitator] put it, and start from there...and just be honest with one another.

Qualitative interviews suggested that participants learned a great deal in the program regarding, communication, conflict management and child support. The reports also suggested that due to this knowledge participants were more willing to engage their co-parents and the child support office as their perspective on these two bridges to their children were enhanced. Participants seemed to have a better understanding regarding where their co-parents and Child Support Services were coming from when it came to implementing consequences for non-payment and poor parental engagement. This understanding may decrease the likelihood that non-custodial parents will become completely disengaged from Child Support and stop making payments when they hit hard times, an outcome that can be devastating for struggling families (Grall, 2000; Meyer & Hu, 1999). Data also suggested that options for ensuring that parents are able to see their children, when there is refusal by the custodial parent, be emphasized in the program in the future.

Perceived Improvements in Relationships and Parental Abilities

Participants consistently shared how their relationships have improved as a result of being in the program. Most indicated that their relationship with both co-parents and children have seen improvements over the relationship quality that had existed before enrolling in the program. One participant explained how he and his custodial co-parent have been working together regarding their shared time caring and spending time with their child. He explained an example of exchanges he and his partner would have regarding how they made decisions about visitation.

"...it could be something that she wanted or something I want. So we just would try to come together without the arguing, 'it's kinda more peaceful now. I definitely don't argue with her and let her know that 'this is what I want' and 'this is what you want' and 'well how about this, how bout I just bring him a little earlier so you won't miss the party for him and then I won't miss my appointment with him'. We just try to work it out a lot better."

The female participant in the group explained the dysfunctional relationship she had with her co-parent before beginning the program, as she often engaged in drinking and partying at the expense of him and her children. However, her reports indicated that while participating in the program her social activities decreased while time spend with her children expanded.

"But I was like really bad with baby's daddy. I would go and just act like, crazy with him because I just want everything my way or the highway. I would go out and just party, drink and do everything and just leave my kids with dad...I think it was [after] four classes, that's... when I started changing. I didn't notice. Like I don't feel like going out. I don't feel like drinking and I just go to baby daddy's house and I would just pick up my kids. I started taking my son to school every day."

She continued by explaining how her improved relationship with her child's father has allowed her more resources that supported her efforts at caring for her children and sharing responsibilities with her co-parent.

"...we just started to be more like friends I guess. He even gave me my car back that he took from me so I could get around. He saw that I wasn't going out anymore and drinking, so he gave me back my car. So then I feel better that I have my car back cause I will be able to take my son to school, pick him up and go do whatever I have to do to keep myself busy with my kids and not bother him at all. So then he was the one calling me to bring him the kids. Because usually I would be the one calling him [to] come pick up the kids."

The second quote was taken from an interview with an older participant who shared a similar account regarding the benefits of healthy relationship content emphasized in the program.

"I got married in 97 and divorced in 99 so I been divorce from her for 14 years and things were not always civil. But now things have gotten to the point where, she likes it when I'm there with my son. [When] she has to go to work my son is

still at school and for the second time yesterday she allowed me to stay in her house. She trusted me.”

A similar account was shared by another participant involving his social activities and the extent to which he has sacrificed them to better engage his co-parent and child. His report indicated that he was more active in his relationship with his co-parent as a result of the program.

“I erased my friends. I erased everything and I'm just now about family. And I'm really glad because I would have been really sad if I lost my family.”

“I could tell how my life has changed around in these past couple of months. I could tell how the progress went so high when it was so low. And I can tell like how it's good because, my partner knows that I'm not selfish no more. She knows that I'm I actually all ears now. Now I'm listening I'm able to do things with her together now. Now I actually go and participate. She would give me half of her time and I would give her half of my time. “

For the most part participants reported improvements regarding their relationships with their children as a result of the BBF program. Participants generally reported spending more time with their children and families and suggesting that their children's' responses to them have been positive. One report from a female participant illustrated this theme well, as she suggested that there was a great deal she did not know about her children before participating in the program.

“... I started spending more time with my kids. Because before they just wanted to be with their dad and now I take them to their dad and they don't want to stay. They just want to sleep with me and my son wants me to pick him up from school every day.”

I didn't know how much attention my kids needed from me until I started spending more time with them. There is so many things I didn't know about my own kids. I would talk to my son and he knows his ABCs. He knows math, like he'll do like 2 plus 1. I didn't know any of that from own son. He knew his birthday he knew his last name. I would just sit there and try to teach him more things, because those are things that not even his dad knew. It's just things that they teach him at school that I didn't know that he knew.”

Some of the male participants also reported that they were not as affectionate with their children and families. Reports from fathers in the program suggested more effort in showing more affection with their children as the example below illustrates.

“...Now it's different. I feel bad now. I want to hug her. Now she knows the difference because she would tell me like that I'm a good daddy now [that] I had time to spend with her. Now I take her to school and I pick her up.”

Relationships with co-parents appeared to improve as a result of the program. This is not surprising given the emphasis that the curriculum places on building and maintaining healthy relationships. It was notable that a fair proportion of program

participants suggested that their relationships with their children were already good and it was the co-parenting relationship that needed improvement. Such accounts further suggest that the Love Notes curriculum is an appropriate fit for non-custodial parents given its topics regarding communication and conflict management. Based on participant reports, both of these skills were imperative in working with custodial parents around visitation, childcare, and shared responsibility.

General Reactions to the BBF program

Participants presented overall positive experiences of BBF program. Participants consistently mentioned how impressed they were with the facilitators as well as the contributions made by the other group members. Several participants expressed that they would continue and even repeat the program if they were permitted to do so.

"It's completely positive. I think at this point, I'm actually hoping that you guys have a secondary course that I can take, a part 2."

"I loved the class. I just wish that it could just keep going and going and going, even without gift card."

"Honestly if it came down to it I wouldn't want it to end today. Because I know that today is the last day and I would definitely do it again if we ever came back to it again."

Positive Peer Group Interactions

Participants noted the group atmosphere was one that created an environment in which group members felt comfortable sharing their experiences. The group itself seems to normalize peer sharing and open communication. Participants seemed to generally value these shared opinions and experiences of other group members, and believed their input was of potential value to other participants. This theme was reflected in the qualitative reports of several parents:

"All the guys were comfortable and they were really open. That's what made me open [up] also. Cause I was like 'oh man I have to reveal my relationship? I have to talk about my personal life?' But I noticed that everybody started to open up. So that really made me feel like 'oh well everybody's opening up, well I'm [going to] open up...we all started opening up and that's what really honestly made me come back. It made me feel comfortable after the first day."

"...after the first hour or two I noticed like everybody was like really talking. I was like 'Wow this guy got almost the same issues as I do.' or 'wow this guy has way crazier issues than I do.'"

"I am a very private person but given the subject matter, given the contents of the discussion, I was able to get my input in whenever I had something that would be worthy for everybody. I'm not the type of person that's going to say something just to be here. If it was something that would be beneficial, I would not hesitate to share."

"We had some interesting discussions and it was nice to hear other people's perspectives, relationships and their past experiences and feeling comfortable enough to bring [them] to the table. We had a very intimate setting."

"...everybody had their own story and everybody discussed how they deal with certain situations with their significant other and their kids."

"...I found out that by doing so you're not embarrassing yourself. Like everybody goes through tough times everybody has that. And not a lot of people speak about it. When people hear your stories or whatever, they tend to have good advice. They've gone through the same thing maybe. And that's really helpful really helpful."

"...me, I'm 40 and the other guys that you talk to is older than that. So like I said it helped us out lot too. So I guess if you could open up that little range and target some guys I think they would definitely appreciate it. From the first class to this class I definitely saw a change in there. You know you have some that was, you know, kind of tight about opening up. Me I opened up right away. You know I'm like 'aw if they give me a chance to let it out I'm letting it out.' So now, everybody is talking, everybody has something to say, everybody has something to bring to the table."

One participant even indicated that his interactions with his peers provided a potential employment opportunity.

"I have some interesting classmates. In fact one guy invited me out to where he works. He's possibly going to hook me up with a job with his company. The network opportunities here have been hopefully life-changing in and of itself."

The peer learning that took place in the BBF program appeared to have been of great benefit to the participants. They appeared to build an environment in which knowledge and experiences were shared. This may have been beneficial as strategies for addressing challenges associated with childcare, child support and co-parental conflicts may be expanded as parents hear successful approaches from other group members.

Positive Experiences with Facilitators

Participants were generally impressed by facilitators' welcoming presence and knowledge regarding healthy relationships. Reports indicated that participants were appreciative of the non-judgmental attitude of facilitators and their abilities to get group members to share their experiences.

"...I never attended a class like that. To be honest with you I was like "ugh I don't want to go, I don't know nobody, I don't know what to expect'. When I got there [the facilitator] basically broke it down to us. She told us that this class is more about how you could better yourself and how you can improve your relationship skills with your other partner and be a better parent. She was never judgmental She was always ears out, so she heard everything that we had to say. She never judged no matter what you'd say."

“...she let us definitely give our own opinion [and] express ourselves. Sometimes [in] the class she would want to go do another activity but she would actually hold on so everybody could get what they need to say out. I really appreciate that.”

Some participants expressed appreciating having a male and female facilitator as it enhanced the diversity of the groups' shared experiences. The reports below illustrate how some male participants felt more comfortable having a male facilitator included as part of the instructor team.

“... we had an instructor that was kind of like me and a really nice Instructor. And the environment of everybody being so open, being able to communicate with each other without hesitating. That's why I felt comfortable.”

“When it comes to relationships, there's a lot of questions that could come up that would make a guy change his response to fit a woman's expectations. [The male facilitator] put it into a different way that made us give our honest answer. He was very helpful.”

“I really enjoyed the class. With her being younger and other being older and experienced in life, I was like 'oh man this is great right here'. One is a man and one is a woman. One been through stuff and one still learning and going to school. I mean everybody had something to bring to the table.”

In addition, participant reports also indicated that the facilitators were generally pleasant and reflected excellent interpersonal skills. The reports below suggested that the personality the facilitator brought to sessions were effective in getting participants to fully engage in the classes.

“She's really kick back and I think if it were up to her she would just have us sit on a bunch of pillows in a circle and just conversate. She just had everybody talking. If you are not that kind of person, that didn't matter you were gonna talk. If it wasn't today it was going to be next week.”

“She's just such a wonderful person. Like it wasn't awkward you know? It was just like fun. When she told us what we are going to talk about I got into it....she just made everything fun. She's always smiling she's a really good person.”

One participant went so far to share how the facilitators in this class compared to the facilitators of the mandatory anger management courses he took due to some of his past criminal activity.

“They know how to facilitate the class cause I done had court cases in my past and [had] different anger management classes. You go to different people and some people just don't like have the skills. They might have a job but they don't have people skills. [The facilitators] just knew how to just talk, you know like talk to the students like adults. Cause some people just ain't really good with actually just opening them up.”

Reports also indicated that participants were generally appreciative of how knowledgeable the facilitators were. Participant reports suggested that the facilitators were very professional and answered questions thoughtfully.

“They were on cue. They [knew] exactly what topic they were doing. They must have done research because they discussed it with us and they gave us insight. The way they handled their course, they did it professionally. I can tell you that much.”

“She wasn't preachy or lecturing. She just gave us the nuts and bolts. She gave us examples. Anytime we ask her a question, she always prefaced it by [saying] ‘hey if I were in that situation this is how I am’ not saying that ‘this is what I'm telling you, you should do’. But it was interesting to hear her perspective. We kind of feel ‘hey, since she's teaching the class she is properly armed in knowing what to do in certain situations’. And it was nice to hear her perspective in certain matters.”

As group members generally appeared to enjoy the program and the interpersonal relationships that it offered, it is no wonder why the retention rate was so high. Participants seemed to look forward to coming and participating in group. Given that it is vital that participants in this program remain invested in the care of their children, the BBF program may offer a great opportunity to help facilitate consistent engagement in family support systems. Without the level of engagement that the program offered, it is difficult to determine the extent to which participants would have remained engaged in the lives of their children and families without a group or a facilitator to check in with.

Suggestions for Future Implementation

The first cohort of BBF pilot participants also provided reports on how the program could be improved for future groups. The transcript portions highlighted below indicated themes regarding the desire for more diversity and more time to cover additional topics.

Although the first cohort of the pilot had some degree of diversity, participants expressed that they would have benefited from more of it. The female participant explained her experience being the only non-male in group and the effect this had on the group dynamic, as members appeared to see her as an information source regarding all custodial mother behavior.

“...cause I was the only girl, they all want[ed] to know what I have to say. I just sit there and listen to what everybody has to say and then it will get to me and then they would just pay so much attention to me cause I'm like the only girl there and they're wondering why their baby mommas are like that. They would just turn around and look at me. So I always had something to say.”

“...some of the guys were like ‘oh my baby momma, why do you think she did this or why do you think she did that’. They always talk about their baby momma being [lazy]. And I'm just like ‘it is not that they're [lazy]. It's just that they deal with kids all day. And then sometimes they just want to come home and just lay

back. And they wonder why when he comes [home] the baby mother want him to take the kids to the park or something and she wants to just sleep. And I have to explain to them why it's like that.

Older men in the group expressed the value in being involved in a program that included younger non-custodial parents. One participant suggested inviting adults who are not parents, as the program could have preventative effects on unhealthy relationships.

"This would definitely help people who don't have kids yet, just to get them ready. One thing that I do think that this class needs is more women. I think it should be coed. I mean it's great that you gearing to guys but it's a lot of women that really really could use it"

A majority of participants expressed that including their co-parents in Love Notes sessions would have been helpful. Those who believed it would be helpful suggested that learning skills of communication and self-awareness would have not only benefitted their co-parents, but would have also improved the partnership they had in raising their children.

Below is one participant's response when answering the question regarding how he believed the experience in the BBF program would be different if his partner were to get involved. He explained how the involvement of a co-parent would ensure that the focus on problem solving would prioritize their daughter's best interest.

"It would be awesome, really awesome. She would understand. She would know everything pretty much [that] I know at this point. I wouldn't expect any apologies and she wouldn't expect any apologies. I would just think that we would both just look into just keeping our eyes on the future. She doesn't have to say 'I forgive you' I don't have to say 'I forgive you' it's just like 'okay yea we were messing up let's just start from here and keep going. We don't have to be together we don't have to have feelings for each other you know. It's all about her. Let's just do it like that. From this point on. That's how I see it happening if she took this course."

Participants also reported that getting their partners involved would have ensured that the skills and knowledge communicated by the facilitators would be heard by both co-parents. The account below suggested the difficulty associated with participants attempting to teach the skills learned in session to their partners.

"I found it to be helpful for me. It's kind of difficult because other people might not think it's helpful. I tried it with my girl and she's kind of like goofy. I made her do [the communication technique] like seriously but it still wasn't right you know. So she's goofy and I'm kind of like more serious but she was playing about it. Like I was telling her let's do it. It's like a real cool technique to do."

Several participants also noted that at times in-depth discussions were permitted at the expense of covering topics in their entirety. According to reports there were costs and

benefits to this, as participants enjoyed discussion but appeared to crave the knowledge that the facilitator previewed from the curriculum. The following quote was one of many that highlighted this observation.

“...for every subject that she brought up we always had a big conversation about it. And it was just that some people didn't finish saying what they have to say because she had to skip to the next subject. [Whatever] we didn't finish talking about that that day, we wouldn't cover it until the next week.”

Although the sessions were three hours participants generally shared that it did not feel that long and even went so far to suggest that sessions should have been even longer. The suggestions given by the participants appeared to be based on a craving for more of what they had already received. Specifically participants did experience group interaction with a slightly diverse group, and recognized its value in expanding their awareness regarding relationships and parenting. This seemed to be the case as participants noted the value of the group exposure to different genders, age groups and custodial parents.

Conclusion

The first cohort of the BBF pilot revealed results suggesting a benefit regarding the application of the Love Notes curriculum for non-custodial parents. Quantitative analyses revealed;

- Improvements in total parental contribution of non-custodial parents,
- Improvement in non-custodial parental engagement,
- Improvements in parental contact and engagement,
- Reductions in child support arrearages,
- Slight increase in child support compliance,
- Improvements in healthy relationship skills and knowledge,
- Improvements in conflict management skills and knowledge and
- Improvements in sexual planning and decision making.

Qualitative interviews also yielded positive results. First, participants generally enjoyed working with the facilitators as well as the other group members. Participants reported engaging with peers in a non-judgmental environment and found the advice and perspectives of other group members helpful towards addressing the problems associated with co-parenting and childcare.

Second, interviews revealed that participants retained a great deal of knowledge around conflict management, communication, and Child Support Services. Moreover participants reported that this knowledge helped them tremendously in working with their co-parents and considering maintaining a relationship with Child Support Services when challenges arose.

The qualitative results regarding child support engagement cannot be emphasized enough as it is pivotal that non-custodial parents understand the importance of maintaining a consistent relationship with Child Support Services as their life circumstances change. A proportion of participants reported that it was their own lack of child support knowledge that contributed to growing arrearages and low compliance. These results are highly promising given research that has identified positive perceptions of child support as a predictor of compliance (Lin, 2004).

Third, the benefits of being able to work successfully with co-parents appears to have strengthened participants efforts in caring for their children, as participants reported being granted privileges by custodial parents that made their parenting efforts simpler.

Follow-up data suggested that some improvements declined over time. Most notably, declines were observed in regards to healthy relationship skills and knowledge and parental contribution. The analyses conducted for this pilot, could not rule out the likely

possibility that sampling error accounted for a great majority of the observed statistical differences. However, the consistency of improvements observed from pretest to posttest as well as the declines at follow-up on multiple measures suggested that interpretations were warranted.

The improvements observed in healthy relationship knowledge and skills immediately following program completion were consistent with the objectives and goals that the Love Notes curriculum was designed to meet. The reductions in these outcomes at follow-up were not surprising given that behavioral intervention effects are generally expected to decrease over time. The declines in long term effects, as well as the shared preference of participants to continue the program, suggests that allowing ongoing and open enrollment is a step worth considering in the future.

The declines in parental contribution were also important to interpret given the complexity of factors that can affect how it is measured, analyzed and reported. Note that results indicated that reported monthly child support obligation decreased over time on average. Given the reports suggesting that the awareness of child support policy increased as a result of the program, it is not unreasonable to assume that participants may have made some adjustments to their child support payment obligations. If this is the case, reductions in child support obligations may be one contributing factor for the overall decrease in parental contribution as well as the slight increase in child support compliance at follow-up. In addition non-custodial parents may have been less likely to provide supplemental financial assistance at follow-up after learning that such behavior would have little to no effect on their monthly child support obligations.

The assessment comparisons in regards to co-parenting cooperation items also revealed a trend that is worthy of interpretation as participants reported higher rating at pretest, followed by a decline at posttest before finally improving at follow-up. It is challenging to say for certain what accounts for this pattern, but qualitative analysis may offer insight. First, participants may have overestimated the quality of their co-parenting relationships before the program. This assumption is consistent with qualitative participant reports that revealed a greater sense of awareness of themselves as well as the quality of their relationships. Their initial overestimation at pretest may have indicated a lack of judgment regarding problematic aspects of their relationships that were previously unknown or unacknowledged. The assumption that participants became more knowledgeable about their relationships was supported by the quantitative findings regarding healthy relationship building knowledge improvement. Furthermore, participants who were receptive to the information presented in the curriculum may have been more eager to engage with their families. As qualitative reports revealed, interactions with children in particular became more salient during the

course of the intervention, which may in turn have facilitated greater efforts, on the part of the non-custodial parent, to become more active in the life of their child. These efforts may have revealed challenges to co-parenting that were unknown to participants prior to program completion, resulting in a reduction in co-parenting cooperation scale ratings at posttest. Additional samples and analysis are necessary to confirm these interpretations.

There were notable characteristics of this preliminary evaluation that are important to mention. First, a major strength of the BBF pilot evaluation was evidenced by its implementation of a mixed methods approach in understanding the potential benefits of the Love Notes curriculum on non-custodial parental outcomes. Using this approach has allowed the evaluation to capture consistencies between quantitative and subjective in-depth reports on key findings associated with non-custodial parenting, contribution, and co-parenting cooperation. Despite the lack of a comparison condition, the mixed methods component of this analysis has added a level of internal validity to the design. With that said, it is also important to mention that the sample size used for this analysis was not large enough to yield generalizable findings. Although the results were promising, few significant findings were observed, suggesting the need for additional samples.

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Appendix A: Notable Case Summaries

O is 24 years old and has 2 children with one partner and has another child on the way by his current partner. O shared his history of gang activity and incarceration while he was still dating his first partner. However after the death of his friend he decided to go straight, and concentrate his efforts on working, strengthening his resume, getting his GED, and being a good father. His relationship has since soured with his first co-parent and she has had a history of making it difficult to see his children. Having a new relationship and a child on the way has only made his relationship with his first co-parent worst. He has also not been able to make consistent payments on the child support case opened by his first co-parent and owes approximately \$4,000. Although his payments have been inconsistent he has shared that he has made efforts to care for the children in his first relationship, which have gone generally unappreciated. O heard about the Building Brighter Futures program via a letter he received in the mail at his home address. His initial assumption was that it was a program that would help him strengthen his resume and teach him more about child support. He was surprised to learn the topics of the curriculum were interesting and tackled real life issues. He enjoyed the ability of the facilitators to keep the topics interesting and get the group members involved in discussion. Given his participation in the program he has made efforts to address custody issues with the court so he can get visitation rights. This has been difficult for him to facilitate as his experiences with the court during his days involved with gangs was generally negative. Hearing others in the program talk about their children did frustrate him, but provided motivation to act regarding his difficult situation. He generally enjoyed the program as it taught him a great deal regarding communication and healthy relationships. He aspires to continue staying on the right path despite the challenges he is facing.

C is a 25 year old mother of two, ages five and two. She was with the father of her child for eight years before they separated and she began to live with her mother. Initially, C explained that she was a selfish parent. She stated that she went out with her friends to party very often. She would leave her children with their father all of the time, even though he works two jobs to support them, while she is currently unemployed. Halfway through the Love Notes lessons, C said that she began to feel different. She couldn't explain it, but she wanted to spend more time with her children and less time partying with her friends. She said that she began to take her son to school every day. In spending more time with him, she realized how much he was learning at school and how smart he was. The father of her children began to see the changes she was making and their co-parenting relationship also improved. He now trusts her to be in his

home while he is at work. She says that they communicate better and that there is less arguing. She even has hopes of them reconciling and being a couple again in the future.

J is a 26 year old father to one daughter. He has a history of drug addiction, but is now sober. As a result of his addiction, the mother of his child will not let him visit his daughter. J is paying child support but has not seen his daughter in several months. J's most memorable lessons in Love Notes were the lesson explaining the Speaker-Listener technique and the budgeting exercise from Money Habitudes. He stated that he had no concept of the value of money before going through the Money Habitudes exercises. He would get money and waste it on his sisters, buying them things that they didn't need. Now he understands that he needs to save more for his future and for his daughter. One of J's sisters was also a participant in the class. He explained that he is able to communicate more openly with her as a result of that. According to J, they grew up hiding their feelings and emotions. Now, they are able to speak freely and it will not result in an argument. He slows down his conversations and takes the time to listen to her now. He said he can tell that she is appreciative of that.

K is a 40 year old father of four. Their ages range from 23-10 years old. They all have different mothers. Two of which he was married to, although he is currently single. K stated that the most memorable part of the program was the lesson that explained the 3,6,9 month rule. He now understands the benefits to taking things slow in a relationship. K said that he always took things too fast when he began to have feelings for a woman, which resulted in four children. K also mentioned that as a result of learning Love Notes, it is easier for him to communicate with his oldest child, with whom he had sole custody of from the ages of 2-18. He understand how to communicate more clearly, which has resulted in fewer arguments with his children and their mothers.

L is a 50 year old father of one daughter, age 25, with whom he has not spoken to and had no relationship with for quite some time. He stated that he tried to contact his daughter via FaceBook, however he received no response. L is originally from California, and is currently living with a relative. He was residing in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. At the time he was driving trucks for a living. After living in a FEMA trailer for two years, and realizing that there was were very limited job opportunities, he was forced out of the trailer and relocated back to California. L was referred to the Building Brighter Futures program through Child Support Services. He is currently \$39,000 in arrears, with \$30,000 of that being interest. He continues to try to stay in compliance with his payments, and on several occasions L used his benchmarks payments to pay his arrearages. The mother of his daughter was given the option to forgive some of the monies owed, but she refused to do so. Upon entering the program, L was unemployed, but actively seeking work. L stated that when the program began he

wasn't really sure what to expect. After going through the lessons and meeting with the Child Support Services representative, L had a better understanding of how the child support system operates and what his parental responsibilities are. He mentioned that he would try to reach out to his daughter again and that he hoped for a good outcome in the future. He believes that he has better coping skills and has benefitted from the program, greatly. He attended eight of the nine scheduled classes and has since been able to secure a job that pays him above the poverty level and provides benefits.

B is a 52 year old father of one son, age 17. He is divorced, but has a decent relationship with his son's mother/ex-wife. He is currently unemployed, but seeking work, while receiving unemployment assistance. B is extremely proud of his son, as he is currently attending a private high school, but hoping to attend Harvard in the fall. B has been in an off and on relationship with a woman he met over 20 years ago. They are currently dating, but B explained that if his ex-wife would take him back, he would be with her. B stated that with the information he learned in the Love Notes lessons, he now knows why his marriage did not last. He stated that although the relationship between he and his ex-wife was not bad, it has gotten even better. His ex-wife has even allowed him to stay in her home when she was not there. He is hopeful that they can rekindle their relationship, but if not, he would like to continue to co-parent with her, successfully.

Appendix B: Qualitative Interview Guide

INSTRUCTIONS: The following semi-structured interview guide represents a list of questions to be asked to participants during qualitative interviews. The interview is to be delivered as if you are having a conversation and not to be implemented as a structured survey interview. Be sure to clarify items and use probing techniques when necessary. Also keep in mind that participants may answer questions out of order. When this occurs it is not necessary to repeat the questions that have been previously answered. **At the start of each recording state the following [date (month, day, year), your name, last 2 digits of participant ID #]** (example: “today’s date is December 13, 2013, this is Tom Green conducting Love Notes interview with participant 03”)

Use the following script as a guide to introduce the interview.

SCRIPT:

MY NAME IS _____ and I am requesting your participation in a brief interview regarding your experience in the Love Notes classes as well as your relationship to your family. During this interview I am going to ask you several questions to which your answers will be recorded on a digital device [show digital device]. The questions I will ask are really about your experiences in the Love Notes sessions and the extent to which it was helpful or unhelpful to you. Your information you provide is essential to informing how we might improve the way that Love Notes sessions are delivered in the future and we appreciate you sharing as much as you feel is appropriate to share. Everything you say will be kept confidential, that means your name will not be attached to your responses. I would just ask that you not mention any names during this interview process and be honest with your responses. This interview should take no more than an hour? Are you ready to begin? [If yes, begin recording]

Inquire about the participant’s expectations regarding the program sessions.

Tell me about what made you decide to attend the program?

What did you expect from the program?

Elicit information regarding what the participant liked and disliked about the Love Notes sessions.

In general, what did you like most about the classes?

What did you like least about the classes?

Explore the participant’s change in comfort and/or attitude as the program sessions progressed.

How has your comfort in the Love Notes classes changed since you started?

Did you become more comfortable or less comfortable? What was responsible for this change if any?

What were the things you felt uncomfortable sharing in the beginning?

Has your attitude or opinion about the program changed in any other way since you started the program?

Explore the participants’ reactions to the instructor of the program.

What about the Instructor, what did you like most about them?

What did you like least?

How has the instructor been helpful to you during your time in the program?

What could the instructor do to be more helpful to you or other participants in the program?

Explore other general experiences in the program such as challenges, working with other group members and valuable lessons learned.

What was the most challenging part about being in the program?

What were the most important things you learned in the classes?

What about the other group members in the class? Did you enjoy working with them? Why/why not?

What do you think can be improved about the program?

Elicit information regarding any changes in their co-parenting relationships as well as future expectations.

What have you learned regarding the relationship with your child's parent/guardian?

How has the relationship with you and your child's other parent/ guardians changed since you enrolled in the program?

If things have changed, how exactly have they changed? And what has been most responsible for this change?

If things have not changed, what has prevented it from changing?

What is your vision for the future regarding the relationship between yourself and your child's other parent?

Since enrolling in the program, what have you done to improve the relationship you have with your child's other parent/guardian?

What has communication with your child's other parent/guardian been like since enrolling in the program? What improvements or declines have you seen? What makes communication challenging? What makes communication effective?

How do you approach or attempt to solve problems that you have with your child's other parent or guardian?

What issues or problems regarding your relationship with your child's other parent/guardian was not addressed in the classes?

Explore any changes in attitudes or behavior regarding the relationship that participants have had with their children since enrolling in the program.

How has the relationship between you and your child changed since you started the program?

How has the time you spend with your child changed since enrolling in the program?

What efforts have you made in providing for your children since enrolling in the program?

How did the program help you regarding your relationship with your child/children?

What are your expectations for the future regarding your relationship with your child/children?

What issues about your relationship or your ability to provide were not addressed in the sessions?

What are your expectations for the future regarding your child's other parent/guardian?

Explore the extent to which participant shared program content with their co-parent/guardian. In addition explore the extent to which they believe that the program would have been more helpful with the addition of their co-parent/guardian.

What have you learned regarding your parental responsibilities from the classes?
Does your child's other parent know that you are participating in this program?
Have you shared any of the things that you've learned with the child's other parent/guardian?
If, so what kind of information did you share with the co-parent/guardian?
If not, what prevented you from sharing information with the co-parent/guardian?
How do you think your experience in the program would have been different if your co-parent/guardian were included in the sessions? Do you think it would be better or worse? Please explain.

Explore what incentives the participant has received for participating in the program. In addition, inquire as to how helpful these incentives were and what additional incentive suggestions the participants have.

Some programs offer incentives for participating such as cash, gift cards, and assistance with expenses such as child support etc. What incentives have you received from the program?
How helpful have these incentives been for you? Please explain.
What additional incentives could be helpful in getting more people to participate in the program?

Elicit information regarding who the participant believes could benefit from Love Notes and the extent to which they would be interested in assisting with recruitment of future participants.

Do you know any other non-custodial parents (friends, family, and associates) that you feel would benefit from this program? If so, what is it about them that makes you think they will benefit from the program?
What do you think we can do to get more people in the program?
Would you be willing to help at all with recruiting more participants? If so, how might you think you can help get more people to enroll in the program?

Inquire about any other experiences participants wish to share regarding their time in the Love Notes session.

Is there anything else you would like to share regarding your experience in the program?