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# Coparenting Decisions and Fathers' Attendance in Parenting Programs: A Dyadic Qualitative Study

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## Abstract

Both parent participation improves parenting program outcomes, yet fathers' attendance remains low. This qualitative study examined how coparenting decision-making shapes attendance decisions. Twelve heterosexual couples with children aged 2–12 years completed joint, semi structured interviews responding to a vignette about a parenting program. We recorded the evolving "decision cascade" from initial preference to final decision and conducted reflexive thematic analysis. Two overarching themes emerged, Program Factors and Coparenting Factors, with subthemes including scheduling/workplace flexibility, delivery format and credibility, topic fit, and gendered role assumptions. Although all couples initially preferred to attend together, discussion of practical constraints and role expectations reliably shifted final decisions toward only one parent attending, most often the mother. Fathers' full-time employment and inflexible work norms were commonly cited, and fathers frequently deferred to perceived maternal expertise, consistent with gatekeeping dynamics. Findings suggest that low father attendance reflects entrenched couple level decision patterns interacting with program design and extra family constraints, rather than fathers' motivation alone. The decision-making processes had their origins in couples transition to parenthood era, which had become fairly entrenched over the course of their coparenting experience. Recruitment and intervention strategies that target coparenting processes, address workplace barriers, and optimize program credibility and fit may better support father participation and improve outcomes for families.


## Highlights

• Qualitative investigation using interviews with couples observing the dyadic decision-making processes.

• Fathers' work inflexibility and perceived maternal expertise were drivers in decision-making process.

• Initial decision to attend together altered overtime to outcome of mother-only attendance.

• Decision-making process had origins in patterns established in transition to parenthood period.

• Coparenting-focused strategies may boost father attendance in parenting programs.

## Introduction

Evidence-informed parenting programs aim to support parents to effectively respond to the social, emotional and behavioral needs of their children. Evaluations of these programs demonstrate involvement of both parents leads to superior outcomes for children (de Santis et al., 2020; Lechowicz et al., 2019; Lundahl et al., 2008; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Unfortunately, it is well documented that fathers attend and engage with parenting programs at consistently lower rates compared to mothers (Dadds et al., 2018; Tully et al., 2017). For example, a meta-analysis of 21 studies examining popular evidence-based parenting program (Triple P) with almost 5000 participants in total, reported only 20% of

participants in their analysis were fathers (Fletcher et al., 2011). Furthermore, there have been numerous other reviews that highlight the distinct underrepresentation of fathers in parenting programs, as well as paediatric research more generally (e.g., Davison et al., 2017; Flippin & Crais, 2011; Gonzalez et al., 2023; Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Parent et al., 2017; Phares et al., 2005). This is concerning as involving fathers in parenting programs is necessary to address father-specific risk factors that can contribute to negative outcomes for children (Tully et al., 2017). Furthermore, the effectiveness of parenting strategies improves when both parents attempt consistent implementation of approaches which is more likely to be achieved when both parents participate in a parenting intervention (Sanders et al., 2010). Unsurprisingly, involving fathers in parenting programs, alongside mothers, is considered good practise (Panter-Brick et al., 2014) and improves intervention efficacy (Lundahl et al., 2008; Sanders et al., 2014). Therefore, an important priority for researchers and practitioners should be the investigation of facilitators and barriers of father involvement in parenting programs. Notably, interventions that include both parenting partners and explicitly address coparenting have produced larger and more durable effects on parental well-being, parenting practises, and child outcomes than father-only formats (Cowan et al., 2025).

## Father Engagement in Parenting Programs

Low paternal engagement in parenting programs is often attributed to practical constraints (e.g., competing work demands, childcare availability), program aspects (e.g., costs, intensity, delivery format), practitioner (e.g., skills) and organisational (e.g., father inclusive policies) factors, and paternal help-seeking attitudes (Glynn & Dale, 2015; Salinas et al., 2011; Sicouri et al., 2018; Tully et al., 2017). Despite attempts to address these barriers by directing recruitment efforts specifically towards fathers (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Yaremych & Persky, 2023), mothers are still more likely to attend these programs than fathers (Deneault et al., 2025; Yaremych & Persky, 2023) suggesting simply identifying such barriers is not sufficient to address this issue. Recent syntheses underscore that father underrepresentation persists despite targeted efforts and across methodologies. A qualitative study highlighted that fathers are often missed not because of lack of interest, but due to recruitment processes that privilege mothers, gate-closing dynamics, and ethical constraints that limit direct access to fathers (Deneault et al., 2025). Further, a family systems ecological review calls for aligning interventions with multidomain models, especially the quality of the co-parenting relationship and outside-the-family stress/supports, as programs directed only to fathers underperform compared to those including both parents (Cowan et al., 2025). To increase involvement of both parents in parenting programs, it has been recommended that greater emphasis is placed on the coparenting relationship during the recruitment and delivery of such programs (Fletcher et al., 2014; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Consistent with this, experienced fathering researchers recommend father-specific recruitment, couple-inclusive outreach, and flexible testing arrangements to counteract mother-centric recruiting processes and procedural barriers that reduce father uptake (Deneault et al., 2025). This approach is consistent with current recommendations to emphasize specific parenting behaviors and coparenting processes demonstrated by fathers, focusing on proximal processes rather than solely on involvement. (Volling & Bornstein, 2025).

# Coparenting

The coparenting relationship refers to complex interpersonal relational factors that impact how parents provide care for their children, make parenting decisions, and respond to challenges related to childrearing (Feinberg, 2002; Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015; Lee et al., 2018; Olsavsky et al., 2020). Coparenting is shaped through societal and cultural influences including gender role norms and expectations (Lee et al., 2018). The coparenting relationship is inherently dynamic and transactional, involving both feedback and feedforward processes. Through repeated joint decision making, co-parents will typically establish patterned responses and role assumptions that then inform future decisions (Cabrera et al., 2014; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2021). The coparenting relationship has been implicated as both a facilitator and barrier to paternal involvement in broader parenting activities (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2021; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2016). In particular, the coparenting relationship functions as a critical "psychological safety net" that enables fathers to engage fully in parenting (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2016) and have a greater sense of self-efficacy (Best & Campbell, 2025). Without this safety, even well-intentioned fathers may struggle to develop their parenting identity and maintain involvement. This positions supportive coparenting not as a luxury but as an essential foundation for father engagement in modern families. This systems perspective is consistent with family systems ecological frameworks, which position father involvement within interconnected domains such as individual well-being, the coparenting relationship, parenting practices, intergenerational patterns, and external stressors and supports. (Cowan et al., 2025). From this perspective, low paternal participation in parenting programs is more likely attributable to established coparenting decision-making patterns, rigid program structures, and prevailing workplace norms, rather than being solely the result of individual preferences (Volling & Bornstein, 2025).

# Decision Making Processes

Extending these findings, it is plausible that low engagement with parenting programs is also influenced by factors within the coparenting relationship. Indeed, observations of decision-making patterns within the coparenting relationship have revealed stereotypical outcomes based on traditional gender roles when it comes to parenting program attendance. Specifically, common decision outcomes encouraged mothers as the primary parent attending parenting programs, a pattern that was reinforced by the observed perception that fathers' participation was not as essential (Wells & Sarkadi, 2012; Wells et al., 2016). Similarly, another study investigating decision making when parents are faced with competing work and family demands found fathers prioritised work over family in instances where their spouse had supported this decision outcome in previous similar scenarios (Shockley & Allen, 2015). These preliminary findings suggests that the coparenting relationship, and the patterns of decision making within this relationship, are likely influential on how parents negotiate program attendance. Unfortunately, previous research has predominantly relied on quantitative methodology that limits thorough exploration of coparenting dynamics, specifically as it relates to the decision-making process

in real time. Parenting research has typically included limited data specific to fathers, and there have been few efforts to gather information from co-parents during actual parenting situations.

## Study Aims

The current study aimed to address the gaps identified in the literature to examine patterns of decision-making within coparenting relationships regarding participation in parenting programs that elucidate barriers and facilitators for the involvement of fathers. It was determined that a qualitative approach would be most suited.

## Methods

# Study Design

This study utilised exploratory qualitative design with thematic analysis. The approach taken in this study was novel, in that couples were interviewed together to observe their communication and decision making in response to a hypothetical scenario about attending a parenting program. Interviewing co-parents together is consistent with family systems ecological and contemporary fathering approaches that conceptualize parenting decisions as emergent from proximal interactional processes which shape both father engagement and program uptake (Cowan et al., 2025; Volling & Bornstein, 2025).

Ethical approval was obtained from the Author Institution Details Human Research Ethics Committee (Ethics approval number: Number). This study is described in accordance with the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (Tong et al., 2007).

# Recruitment

A convenience sample of potential participant dyads, consisting of couples aged 18 years and older, who were currently cohabiting with their biological children and sharing at least one child aged between 2 and 12 years old, were recruited using targeted advertising. Advertising included the use of email distribution lists, local radio interviews, and social media. Potential participants were advised the purpose of the research project was to explore barriers and facilitators of fathers' involvement in parenting programs. Potential participants interested in finding out more about the study were directed to contact the first author and were then provided with the study information sheet and consent form. Once consent was obtained, interviews were scheduled at a mutually convenient time and place. Due to the sampling recruitment approach undertaken, it is unknown how many individuals refused to participate after being invited; however, no participants withdrew from the study after providing consent.

## Procedure and Data Collection

Demographic information was collected on participants, and a semi-structured interview guide was used to collect qualitative data. At the beginning of the interview, participants were presented with a vignette stating: "*One of your children has been experiencing emotional and/or behavioral difficulties to the extent that it has been causing you strain and distress. You receive a flyer through your community (i.e., school) offering attendance at a parenting program*."

Participant dyads were then asked a series of open-ended questions to prompt further discussion, encourage reflection of decision-making processes, and identify potential barriers and facilitators to paternal involvement in parenting interventions (see Supplementary Materials for semi-structured interview schedule). All interviews were conducted by the first author. Most interviews were conducted in participants' homes ($n$ = 9), however in instances where distance created a barrier for in-person interviews, interviews were conducted online ($n$ = 3). Only the interviewer and the participant dyad were present for the interview. Interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. After transcription, participants reviewed their interview transcripts and confirmed their accuracy, with no corrections requested. Transcript accuracy was verified by participants. Member checking of themes was not performed.

## Research Team and Reflexivity

The first author (A1) conducted the interviews. At the time of the interviews, he was a PhD candidate and a registered clinical psychologist with prior clinical experience working with families, parents and young people in community settings. There were no established relationships between the researchers and participants, and no information was provided to participants about the interviewer or coders before the interview took place. The co-author (A5) is an experienced qualitative researcher and supervisor. A5 provided a review of the transcript and scrutinised the initial themes and subthemes identified by A5. The data and subsequent analysis were reviewed by the co-author A4 to ensure appropriate rigour was taken with the analysis, and to reduce bias in the interpretation and discussion of results (Morrow, 2005).

# Data Analysis

NVivo (v. 12) was used to assist in qualitative data analysis. Data analysis was conducted in two stages. First, the decisions made by participant dyads on whether the mother, father, or both would attend the parenting program was recorded and sequenced from the initial decision after first shown the vignette, intermediate position after encouraged consideration of attendance barriers and facilitators, and the final decision recorded at the end of the interview. Next, transcripts were reviewed using thematic analysis. Informed by the guidelines outlined in Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019), the first author familiarised himself with the data by first reviewing each transcript independently. Then initial codes were generated, consisting of sections of the transcripts, that were then categorised into candidate themes that shared unifying features. Identified codes and themes were iteratively reviewed and further refined and then agreed upon by the other coders (CB) to ensure rigour and quality analysis. There were no disagreements between coders reported during this process. Coding proceeded iteratively until no

new codes or themes were identified across interviews, indicating thematic sufficiency for our aims. This analytic approach allowed for deep immersion in the data that enabled exploration of key themes in the decision-making process and identification of factors that facilitate or inhibit fathers' involvement in parenting.

## Results

# Participants

Twelve couple dyads (*N* = 24) were recruited and interviewed (see Table 1). On average, participants were 38.54 years old (*SD* = 3.73). Fathers were aged between 34 and 46 years (*M* = 39.08, *SD* = 3.65) and mothers were aged between 33 and 45 years (*M* = 38.00, *SD* = 3.88). The majority of participants were born in Australia (*n* = 20, 83.33%), tertiary educated (*n* = 17, 70.08%), and employed in full-time work (*n* = 18, 75.00%). All fathers reported being in full-time employment. All participants reported their relationship status as married and in a heterosexual relationship, and confirmed English was their first language. The average number of children per household was 2.75 (*SD* = 0.87, range = 2 to 5 children), aged between 1 and 12 years old (M = 7years). A total of 6 hours and 31 minutes of interviews were captured. Interviews ranged from 21 minutes to 46 minutes in length (*M* = 32 minutes. Generic pseudonyms were created by the researchers and then randomly assigned to be used in the analysis process to maintain anonymity.

Table 1

*Participant Pseudonyms and Demographic Information*

| | Pseudonym | Age | Country of Birth | Education Level | Employment Status | Number of Children |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Couple 1 | Phillip | 43 | United Kingdom | Tertiary | Full-time | 3 |
| | Elizabeth | 43 | United Kingdom | Tertiary | Full-time | |
| Couple 2 | Kevin | 38 | Australia | Secondary | Full-time | 3 |
| | Fiona | 37 | Australia | Tertiary | Student | |
| Couple 3 | Jeff | 34 | Australia | Tertiary | Full-time | 3 |
| | Janet | 33 | Australia | Tertiary | Part-time | |
| Couple 4 | Richard | 41 | Australia | Tertiary | Full-time | 2 |
| | Amanda | 42 | Australia | Tertiary | Full-time | |
| Couple 5 | Jack | 42 | Australia | Secondary | Full-time | 2 |
| | Jillian | 40 | Australia | Secondary | SAHM | |
| Couple 6 | Simon | 39 | New Zealand | Tertiary | Full-time | 3 |
| | Mary | 36 | Australia | Tertiary | Full-time | |
| Couple 7 | Luke | 35 | Australia | Tertiary | Full-time | 2 |
| | Leia | 33 | Australia | Tertiary | Full-time | |
| Couple 8 | Sam | 39 | Australia | Trade | Full-time | 3 |
| | Jenny | 38 | United Kingdom | Tertiary | Part-time | |
| Couple 9 | Mark | 40 | Australia | Tertiary | Full-time | 2 |
| | Michelle | 37 | Australia | Tertiary | Full-time | |
| Couple 10 | Brad | 46 | Australia | Tertiary | Full-time | 3 |

*Note*. SAHM = stay at home mother.

| | Pseudonym | Age | Country of Birth | Education Level | Employment Status | Number of Children |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Rachael | 45 | Australia | Secondary | Part-time | |
| Couple 11 | David | 34 | Australia | Tertiary | Full-time | 2 |
| | Dana | 34 | Australia | Trade | Full-time | |
| Couple 12 | Allan | 38 | Australia | Trade | Full-time | 5 |
| | Katie | 38 | Australia | Tertiary | Part-time | |

*Note*. SAHM = stay at home mother.

Table 1

# Insert

# Decision Outcomes

Table 2 summarises the decision outcomes made by participant dyads across the course of the interview. Initially, all couples indicated that their preference would be to attend the parenting program together. At the intermediary and final stages, participants were encouraged to further consider potential barriers and facilitators to aid their decision making. After consideration of these factors, six couples had adjusted their decision to only one parent attending at the intermediary stage and, at the final decision stage, all couples confirmed their decision to have only one parent attending, with the mother being the most nominated parent.

Table 2

*Participant Dyads' Vignette Decision Outcomes*

| | Pseudonym | Initial Decision | Intermediary Decision | Final Decision |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Couple 1 | Phillip & Elizabeth | Both Attend | Both Attend | Mother attend – father less inclined to group format |
| Couple 2 | Kevin & Fiona | Both Attend | If mother cannot, father willing | Mother attend – mother's expertise noted |
| Couple 3 | Jeff & Janet | Both Attend | Both Attend | Mother attend – only if babysitting/work absolutely prevented both |
| Couple 4 | Richard & Amanda | Both Attend | Either parent – depends on issue | Mother attend – seen as emotional issue, so more suited to mother |
| Couple 5 | Jack & Jillian | Both Attend | Either parent | Mother attend – mother noted as primary carer |
| Couple 6 | Simon & Mary | Both Attend | Mother attend – reluctance of father | Mother attend – pattern in their coparenting |
| Couple 7 | Luke & Leia | Both Attend | Both Attend | Mother attend – seen as having more expertise in such matters |
| Couple 8 | Sam & Jenny | Both Attend | Mother – work likely to be a conflict for father | Mother attend – based on mother as primary carer |
| Couple 9 | Mark & Michelle | Both Attend | Both Attend | Mother – note mother's lead |
| Couple 10 | Brad & Rachel | Both Attend | Mother – mainly work and care conflicts | Mother attend – mother seen as primary carer |
| Couple 11 | David & Dana | Both Attend | Both Attend | Father attend – seen as his area of strength |
| Couple 12 | Allan & Katie | Both Attend | Both Attend | Mother attend – mother seen as primary carer |

Table 2

# Insert

# Thematic Analysis

The analysis revealed two main themes, each with several sub-themes, that pertain to factors that were considered by couples during the decision-making process. The main themes were named by the researchers as Parenting Program Factors and Coparenting Factors. Note that due to the complex interrelationship between themes, the themes are not intended to be viewed in isolation despite the

structure in which they are described within here. Rather, content frequently overlapped between themes and therefore discussion is interwoven between themes to more clearly articulate the complex decision-making processes between couples. No theme or sub-theme was considered to have any greater or lesser value than another.

# Theme 1: Parenting Program Factors

The first theme, Parenting Program Factors, is composed of four subthemes that summarise specific program factors that facilitate or inhibit paternal attendance.

**Scheduling / Timing.** All participants expressed a preference for the program to be delivered outside normal business hours to support attendance of both parents.

*We've also gone to things separately…. but if time and timetables allow, then we would always go together.* (Couple 7, Leia)

Some couples indicated that childcare availability was limited, and therefore this would likely result in only one parent being able to attend the program. In addition, all participants reported that the work schedule of the father was the primary inhibitor to both parents attending a parenting program. Participants confirmed that if the timing of the program required changes to the father's work schedule to attend, the mother would typically be tasked with attending on her own. Many mothers reported that their work arrangements were far more flexible than the fathers, which made it easier to accommodate activities for their children. This parenting arrangement was further endorsed by most fathers in the sample reiterating their workplace held traditional stereotypes of paternal involvement in caregiving which created barriers to attending programs during work hours. It was evident that for some couples, circumstances such as employment, earning potential and lack of flexible working arrangements for fathers reinforced traditional gender roles. For example:

[My workplace would consider that] *the mother's place to do that sort of interaction.* (Couple 5, Jack)

*You're the dad…why do you need to finish work early for… or change your work hours?* (Couple 11, David)

However, if more flexible arrangements were possible, then fathers often reported a willingness to attend parenting programs. For example:

*Could I get the time off work? I guess that's the biggest factor…*[work] *would be the only obstacle.* (Couple 8, Sam)

**Location and Delivery Format.** Several participants mentioned the location and delivery style of the program would influence their decision regarding attendance. Most participants expressed a preference for the program to be hosted locally (e.g., at their child's school). It may be that family settings, like schools and community health centres, feel more welcoming and inclusive to fathers, supporting their attendance to program. However, one couple disagreed with the others, stating that they would both prefer a venue where they are not known by others.

*I'd probably want to go to something that's slightly more anonymous (*Couple 1, Elizabeth). *Yeah, I agree, I think you'd both prefer to go into town…[or] an area where we're not – yeah, we're not known.* (Couple 1, Phillip).

Participants also stated preferences regarding the delivery format of the program, with most fathers expressing that they would prefer a face-to-face and/or engaging delivery format.

*It depends on the format; I don't like anything that's workbook [based]; I like doing stuff.* [Interviewer: So, you're more of a role play… show me, practise something.] *Yeah, and get to the point as well.* (Couple 6, Simon)

*[I] would see that as a bit of a negative for the program. I think having a group of parents there together discussing the program as it goes along rather than just reading it online and asking whatever questions come to your mind…definitely having a lot of different parents there with a lot of different ideas…it makes it less academic, more [of a] community type of thing.* (Couple 5, Jack)

The importance placed on the delivery format by fathers in this sample was also reinforced by comments made by their partners, with many mothers suggesting the style of program delivery would influence their decision if the father should attend. It was observed during the interviews that these comments were not refuted by fathers, suggesting agreeance between couples.

*Mark learns best from video and seminar [sic face-to-face] presentations.* (Couple 9, Michelle)

*He does not retain information well. So, to send him to a course, especially a paid one…that information is never coming home* [both laugh]. (Couple 8, Jenny)

*Simon and I have different learning styles…so the online thing…when he was at uni he didn't like reading the textbook, he liked listening to the lectures, just going through it that way and so I thought the online one* [program] *because it was predominantly this video message and then a little bit of activities that you work through* [and] *I thought 'oh yeah, that should work for Simon'. I don't mind that stuff, actually I quite like some of that stuff, but I also find it really easy if I can just read through something and I just write out the points for myself.* (Couple 6, Mary)

**Credibility**. Several participants emphasised that the credibility of the program offered was an important influence on their decision to attend. It was observed that fathers mentioned this concern more frequently than mothers during the interviews. Comments made by fathers indicated that they were invested in the expertise of the presenter and the evidence supporting the material presented.

*We'd probably have done our research and seen that this is a valuable and useful approach…I think, for me, it would have to be a registered psych[ologist] or someone of that – and I don't mean it to be hierarchical or anything like that but I think if you're putting yourself out there, being quite vulnerable, it would need to be a really credible source.* (Couple 1, Phillip)

*It's different to when you're hearing it from someone who – like a professional who's actually delivering* [the program]. (Couple 10, Brad)

**Program Topic.** Participants also considered the focus of the program as an important factor in their decision regarding father attendance. For example, it was observed that most fathers in this sample prefaced topics related to emotional and behavioral difficulties were an area of strength for the mother. Therefore, if other external demands (e.g., childcare arrangements, work commitments) prohibited both parents attending a program focused on these topics, then the preferred negotiated decision was for the mother to attend. For example:

*If it's a situation where there's a logistical issue which prevents one of us from attending – for example, no babysitter available – I think then it comes down to the scenario that we're trying to address as to who was relating to it more. So, if it was an emotional distress and stuff, I'd say you'd [mother] be more likely to go because it – they're speaking a language you can understand better than I can.* (Couple 4, Richard)

**Program Cost / Financial Impact.** Program cost was mentioned by some participants, although this appeared to be a minor consideration in decision making. It was observed that participants considered the importance of seeking professional help for their child outweighed the impact of the expense, so long as that expense was not considered excessive.

*"It's almost like a cost, benefit analysis given that we've got limited resources and it's like, how can – what's the best value we're going to get?" (*Couple 1, Phillip*)*

*"first thing we would look at would be time, is it possible to get there and is there a cost involved"* (Couple 5, Jillian)

*"So I don't think cost would be a barrier, I think we would do it if it came at some kind of financial cost"* (Couple 6, Simon)

However, the financial impact on parenting roles more broadly was considered by some participants. Specifically, the decision on who would stay home to care for their infant children was determined by which parent was the higher wage earner:

*It's who earns the most; it's so sad.* (Couple 8, Jenny)

# Theme 2: Coparenting Factors

The second main theme, Coparenting Factors, is composed of egalitarian parenting and gender role stereotypes subthemes that summarise two distinct parenting approaches that would, respectively, facilitate or inhibit fathers from attending parenting programs.

**Egalitarian Parenting Approach.** At the introduction of the vignette, all couples indicated they would want to attend the program together. This preference was reiterated throughout the decision-making stages, and it was frequently noted that if other barriers were not present (e.g., scheduling and working

arrangements etcetera), that they would prefer to attend the program together. For some couples, this decision appeared influenced by their expressed preference for an egalitarian approach to parenting, whereby parenting duties (such as program attendance) were shared equally between parents. For these couples, the evolution of this patterned decision to approach parenting tasks equally was evident in their accounts of early stages of Coparenting.

*I notice different from you [to father] to many other dads in that you were part of the kids routines very early on, like from birth, bathing and settling to bed, and those things. But you did that from the beginning…You knew what you were doing. From the first one, yeah, you were always putting them to bed, or feeding them if you could, or whatever* [Directed toward the father]. (Couple 2, Fiona)

*We both wanted children, we had like similar values and ideas about how to raise kids and how not to...and we were both of the same sort of opinion. So, like there was a bit of a consensus of what not to do and what we sort of felt was valuable in terms of raising children. So, we kind of established that a long time before we had kids.* (Couple 11, David)

*I feel like this has evolved across time. I feel like when the kids were little, you certainly, kind of, just deferred to me a little bit more and just followed what I did or said or recommended. Whereas now that – now it's definitely 50/50 and both on board. Having said that, even when they were young if I said read a book, you'd read it and be engaged in it.* (Couple 4, Amanda)

Most of the fathers in the sample reported a desire to be actively involved in parenting their children early in the transition to parenting period.

*"I was 30 and I was quite excited about being a new dad, very committed to it".* (Couple 1, Phillip)

Aligning with this egalitarian parenting approach, participants provided examples of lifestyle changes that those fathers had made, primarily to overcome identified barriers such as work commitments, to enable them to share childcare duties more equally. For example, one father (David) indicated that he enjoyed caring for young children and therefore chose to transition to an administrative career, with less travel and more predictable hours, so that he could be more available:

*I like little kids and, do you know what I mean, like I didn't want to father a child to fob it off to the mother and the grandmother.* (Couple 11, David)

Most couples acknowledged that coparenting together had at times resulted in conflict between them, which had caused tension in their relationship, and the need to find compromise. When reflecting about their experiences as parents, most couples indicated a level of conflict that they have needed to navigate. As noted by Michelle (Couple 9):

"I think at times we have gone head-to-head".

Most couples described a willingness to discuss and work through any differences in their parenting, and that the coparenting role was more shared and balanced as a result. In terms of the hypothetical scenario, couples were asked if there might be any conflict that may arise when considering this situation. Couples did not indicate any heightened levels of conflict that they would predict or expect, although some noted that external pressures (e.g., work demands) may cause some conflict for them to navigate for them to attend the program together.

**Gender Role Stereotypes.** Decision making patterns were also observed to be strongly influenced by traditional gender role stereotypes, in which the mother was designated as the primary or 'lead' parent and therefore, would attend the program instead of the father. This pattern of decision making emerged when the interviewer intensified the hypothetical scenario with additional external barriers during the intermediary and final decision stages.

*She then looks after the children, she raises the children, she [cleans] the house ... That's why I think it's an automatic given.* (Couple 8, Jenny)

*Me being the primary care giver, as being the mother, … and not working for a period of time I think that's just fallen to me to do a lot of those kind of … things that I guess sometimes are not in his circle of concern.* (Couple 10, Rachel)

Sam: *We're probably just stereotypical and yeah.* Jenny: *It would be me that would go.* Sam: *It would be [you that would] go, yeah.* (Couple 8)

Note this stereotypical response between couples was observed to give a sense of it being a normal pattern in the decision making in their relationship. It was also evident during the interviews that fathers frequently engaged in active facilitation of the mother taking the lead parent role. This appeared reinforced by endorsed beliefs that the mother had greater parenting expertise and therefore should be the one to attend the program. At times, this facilitation occurred overtly through words chosen in the exchange, such as referring to the mother's expertise in parenting. For example:

*So, if it was a[n] emotional distress and stuff, I'd say you'd be more likely to go because it – they're speaking a language you can understand better than I can* [emphasis added]. *But then if it's another issue – academics or music or whatever it is – I might be the one who's better suited between the two of us to go.* (Couple 4, Richard)

Facilitation of mothers to take the lead role also occurred in a more subtle manner when fathers were observed to use humour and laughter to highlight the mother the expert throughout the interviews. For example, Alan (Couple 12) responded:

[Interviewer: [So] a lady has more expertise with children or parenting…?] *Well they were in there for 9 months so I suppose* (Allan, Couple 12). [Interviewer: So that incubation period caused some kind of high[er] learning?] (All laughing) *Yep.* (Allan).

Some mothers also appeared to have internalised these stereotypical beliefs and reinforce them through their own parenting actions despite holding negative attitudes towards this. For example:

*It's sometimes hard for the mum to give over, because you feel all this responsibility.* (Couple 2, Fiona)

*I do get tired of running everything but it's like if you want it done well do it yourself, hey?* (Couple 12, Katie)

## Discussion

This novel study observed a clear decision-making pattern within this sample of coparents. Aligning with previous research (Glynn & Dale, 2015; Salinas et al., 2011; Sicouri et al., 2018; Tully et al., 2017), participants initially identified several program-related factors that would likely impact on their ability to attend the program. When the presence of these factors was intensified across the decision-making stages by the interviewer, most participants moved from an egalitarian parenting preference (i.e., both parents attend) to only the mother attending in the final stage. Taken together, the observed decision cascade reflects the proximal coparenting processes that contemporary fathering scholarship identifies as the true engines of change—moment-to-moment role negotiation, gate-opening/closing, and credibility/fit judgments—rather than fathers' time per se (Volling & Bornstein, 2025). These patterns map onto multiple domains of a family systems ecological model: coparenting role assumptions and gate-opening/closing (coparenting domain), work inflexibility (extra-family stressors), perceived maternal expertise (intergenerational/cultural scripts), and delivery-format fit and credibility (parenting/program support). Single-domain solutions are therefore unlikely to shift final attendance decisions (Cowan et al., 2025), particularly when decisions hinge on the quality—not quantity—of fathering and coparenting processes (Volling & Bornstein, 2025).

Outcomes of the thematic analysis highlighted that this final decision appeared influenced by mothers assuming the lead parent role, which was facilitated by fathers during the interviews. This decision-making pattern appeared informed by maternal essentialism, a concept that is insufficiently explored in the parenting program literature. Specifically, it was observed that fathers' decision-making strategy often involved appeals to mothers taking the lead role which were informed by expressed presumptions that mothers had greater expertise in parenting and child development (Berrigan et al., 2021; Zegarac et al., 2024), particularly when other external factors (e.g., work commitments) were emphasised. This finding also aligned with previous research that indicated mothers tend to personally take the lead role in parenting, referred to as *maternal gatekeeping* which may then create barrier for father involvement in parenting activities more generally (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2021).

While previous research has investigated attitudes, behaviors, and experiences of mothers with respect to maternal gatekeeping, there has been insufficient attention given to the experience and contribution by fathers to maternal gatekeeping, and whether behaviors and attitudes of fathers are complicit in this phenomenon (Olsavsky et al., 2020). It is argued that when fathers repeatedly relinquish the lead parent role to mothers, as was observed in this study, that this would form a pattern that will inform their coparenting relationship and future decision making. Overtime, this is likely to decrease paternal

involvement in parenting activities. Furthermore, it may increase conflict within the coparenting relationship, which is resolved either through heightened arguments and tension, or passivity and withdrawal by the fathers (as was observed in this study). If the decision to attend a parenting program serves as a specific example of how maternal gatekeeping plays out in the coparenting relationship, this would suggest that it is important to investigate this phenomenon in general coparenting experiences also. Given that this study noted fathers' collusion with maternal gatekeeping, and that both parents were active participants in these interactions, it may be prudent to review this phenomenon of parental gatekeeping, acknowledging the more bi-directional nature of this dynamic. To date, gatekeeping literature has predominantly focused on the maternal characteristics, processes and behaviors that either hinder or encourage father involvement. There has been limited research on paternal factors present in parental gatekeeping (Thompson, & Lee, 2022).

Findings from the current study are consistent with previous recommendations that the coparenting relationship should be a focus to those involved in the design and delivery of such programs (Fletcher et al., 2014; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Much of the literature to date has focused on program-related factors to address low paternal involvement with only some success (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Yaremych & Persky, 2023). Stakeholders should also consider that the decision for fathers to participate in parenting programs is likely also influenced by well-established decision-making patterns within the coparenting relationship and that simple 'father-friendly' program designs and/or the inclusion of a male facilitator may not be sufficient to overcome these ingrained relationship dynamics. This reframing clarifies why father-only recruitment fixes are insufficient when entrenched couple-level patterns steer final attendance. Aligned with a family systems ecological perspective, couple-inclusive programs designed to support high-quality coparenting and to guide fathers in specific practices demonstrate more robust and enduring outcomes than interventions focused solely on fathers (Cowan et al., 2025; Volling & Bornstein, 2025). Our results are consistent with recommendations to advance beyond mere counts of "involvement" and instead focus on the relational dynamics of fatherhood, such as coparenting collaboration, gate-opening and gate-closing practices, and distinct caregiving behaviors that drive proximal processes of change. (Volling & Bornstein, 2025).

# Limitations and Future Directions

This study presents novel findings using unique qualitative methodology; however the study has several limitations that should be considered. Most importantly, the small sample consisted of well-educated, employed, Caucasian, Australian heterosexual couples, thus limiting generalisability of the findings to other populations, including culturally and linguistically diverse populations, parents from and parents belonging to LGBTQIA + communities. Although the themes in this research may relate to the experience of fathers more broadly, follow-up research in larger and more diverse samples is required to confirm this. Furthermore, the interview schedule used in the current study did not facilitate thorough exploration of how fathers *felt* about the final negotiated decision outcome. Understanding fathers' attitudes towards these decision outcomes may elucidate targets for recruitment and intervention.

A novel aspect of this research was investigating the coparenting relationship as a separate entity. The decision to interview couples together, using a hypothetical scenario, proved to be a useful contribution to the literature. To our knowledge, there are no similar studies in the parenting program literature where couples were interviewed, and the interactions of their decision-making process analysed as a combined piece of data as opposed to separately. Replicating this research methodology to investigate broader coparenting concepts may be useful for advancing our understanding of maternal gatekeeping.

Future studies should directly assess fathering behaviors and co-parent processes (e.g., observed problem-solving, play, and joint decision-making tasks) and broaden samples to underrepresented fathers (e.g., primary caregiving, non-resident, military, child-welfare contexts), reflecting the contemporary scope of fathering science (Volling & Bornstein, 2025).

Last, experimental tests that compare father-only versus co-parent couple formats using the same curriculum—and that measure cross-domain change (coparenting quality, father "active ingredients," parenting practises, child outcomes, and economic/self-sufficiency)—would clarify the mechanisms implied by our qualitative decision cascade (Cowan et al., 2025; Volling & Bornstein, 2025).

## Conclusions

The overall findings of this research highlight the importance of the transition to parenting period, and how patterns of behavior established in the coparenting relationship persist throughout the coparenting journey of mothers and fathers. It is argued that the low participation rates of fathers in parenting programs are symptomatic of problematic experiences of fathers generally, which has its genesis in the formation of the coparenting relationship in the transition to parenthood phase. Therefore, to return to the original dilemma of how to better involve fathers in parenting programs, practitioners and researchers must assist with improving these formative experiences for fathers. The emphasis of all stakeholders would be best focused on this period in a father's life to improve the trajectory of father involvement across the whole journey of coparenting.

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individual participants included in the study prior to commencement. The study reports aggregated, de-identified data and does not include any individual person's identifiable information requiring consent for publication.

Data availability statement: de-identified data are available on reasonable request

Author contributions: All authors contributed substantially to this work in accordance with recommended authorship criteria. A3 provided supervision and feedback for the broader PhD project of which this study was a part. A1 and A5 designed the study. A1 undertook all recruitment activities and conducted the interviews. A1 and A5 led the data analysis process, with review and oversight provided by A4. A2 assisted with the final manuscript writing and revision, incorporating input from A1. A5 and A4 provided final reviews of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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- AppendixA1.docx