

What factors influence fathers' recruitment and retention in the No Kidding Program?

Overview:

In 2006, No Kidding (NK) staff sought to bolster their ability to impact teen fathers. They wanted to augment their past success by increasing focus on teen fathers through better recruitment and retention, and by enhancing services available to fathers in the program. In creating the Fatherhood Initiative, NK hopes to improve their capacity to influence the fathers who deliver the NK presentations and the youth who hear them. To help reach this goal, focus groups were conducted to examine the recruitment and retention of fathers in the NK program. This document reports findings from these focus groups.

Methodology:

Two focus groups were conducted with fathers in the program. The first had two participants, both fathers *new* to the program (joined program in spring 2007) and lasted 50 minutes. The second group included fathers *returning* (joined program in fall 2006 or earlier) to the program, had three participants and lasted 45 minutes. The sessions took place in YouthLaunch (YL) offices. Results are presented below for the following key questions: 1) How did fathers find out about the program? 2) Why did fathers join the program? 3) What influences (or will influence) fathers' decision to remain in the program? and 4) How does NK meet the needs of participants as fathers *and* men?

It is important to note that a total of *five* individuals participated in the focus groups. Although rich information regarding the program was gathered, conclusions and recommendations are somewhat tenuous because of the small sample size.

Results:

1) How did fathers find out about the program?

New fathers (NFs) both found out about NK through Craigslist. They found the ability to call someone and discuss the program (instead of via email) as a key in recruitment. These initial conversations during which NK staff were "really warm and inviting" cemented their desire to find out more about the program.

Returning fathers (RFs) stated that they learned of the NK program through girlfriends and personal contacts.

2) Why did fathers join the program?

NFs became interested in the program and joined because it sounded like something that "applied" to their lives and they were motivated to talk to youth. An equally important incentive was the perceived potential for a high level of income. One NF described that the initial conversations on pay and number of possible presentations was a big factor in the choice to join; however, he has come to realize that pay rates are considerably lower than he anticipated. Additionally, one NF noticed during interviews that the NK staff and interns were a "tight" group and these strong social connections influenced his desire to join the program.

Upon first hearing about the program, RFs unanimously felt that NK would be a good opportunity to work

with youth and share with others their experiences regarding becoming a parent. Unlike the NFs, the RFs did not emphasize remuneration as an incentive to join. They viewed the effect on youth as the primary reason to consider the program. One RF stated that it was an opportunity to be more of a “mentor ...than a job” and the opportunity to help was a key reason to join. Another RF summarized the group conversation by stating that participation in NK would “help me unleash some of the things [about myself] I need to unleash.” Two RFs also recalled that they were interesting in the program because it would help them “figure out new things and how to better [our]selves.” RFs saw NK participation as an opportunity to enhance their future by better understanding their current situation thus giving them a stronger self identity as they move forward.

3) What influences (or will influence) fathers’ decision to remain in the program?

Finances were the key issue that NFs anticipated would affect their ability to remain in the program long-term. Extensive discussions between the two NFs took place regarding the amount of money that one needed to make from NK for that to be their primary source of income. The NFs stated that the amount of money is adequate for those with other jobs, working partners, or financial aid. They both felt that NK would be the type of job they would consider doing full-time. They described that having an impact on youth was a key benefit to the program, but that their ability to remain in the program is hampered by lack of income. They both had anticipated receiving more opportunity for presentations based on what they had heard during the interview process – “I wanted to work more and I wish there was more we could do than just give speeches at schools.” They hoped that possible NK expansion to other districts or expanding the roles available to them in NK could lead to more work.

Both NFs also stated that daycare during presentations and/or meetings would be helpful. One of the NFs felt that the opportunity to have childcare would outweigh much of the influence of limited remuneration because it would allow for greater flexibility in scheduling.

“So me reaching out to kids also helps me to keep going because I know I’m helping to connect with somebody.” NK Program Participant

Although the conversation on retention focused initially on finances, the NFs also described that a key reason for staying is why they joined – to have an effect on youth. If one can “talk to a class of thirty or a class of three and that you have the chance to impact just one kid and he won’t make the same decision that you did. It makes all the difference.” NFs felt the social interactions with staff and other interns was also a key factor in retention. The “tight” group and “laid-back attitude” was appreciated by both NFs.

In summary, the two NFs varied in the relative importance of increased remuneration versus the desire to positively impact youth. Circumstances such as a working partner or the availability of other sources of income or daycare appeared to be a primary factor that may ultimately affect their retention.

RFs were less concerned about remuneration in the retention process than NFs. RFs focused on the positive influence they had on youth as a motivating factor while their concerns focused on internal NK processes. The RFs felt strongly that helping youth understand the ramifications of having children at a young age was a primary reason to remain in the program. As one noted, “so me reaching out to kids also helps me to keep going because I know I’m helping to connect with somebody.”

All of the RFs described a positive change in their self concept that affected their desire to remain in the program. They acknowledged that they are in a difficult situation, being young parents, but they noted that they have turned it into a positive and are now a resource for their communities. Comments such as “there’s not a lot of guys that do this” and “knowledge is power” reveal that RFs discovered they have specialized knowledge that not only benefits youth and their communities (through informal means), but led to increased self confidence as they see themselves as “role models.”

RFs greatly appreciated the role of the male program specialist for the Fatherhood Initiative. They felt in the

past the small number of men led to their ideas being “minimized.” They appreciated that there is now a man (program specialist) who they can now speak with regarding issues – one RF summed up this aspect by stating that “it [having the program specialist] makes it a lot less stressful.”

The concerns of RFs focused on NK program processes. The RFs discussed whether NK program rules had been applied equally to male and female interns. The main instance they related was the age in which men versus women are allowed to join the program. They did not understand why a woman who had their child after the age of 20 was allowed to join but that a man was not. They stated they would be more comfortable in the program if the rules were applied equally.

There was concern that some of the more permanent program hires had not gone through an open hiring process. They hoped that any future positions will have a formal hiring process that would include specified job criteria. They also hoped that interns would be made aware of new positions before the hiring occurs. They were curious to see how the program could include them in more substantial positions as NK expands.

Another issue that RFs discussed was frustration with the program rule prohibiting them from talking to youth more frankly about sex. They stated that it minimizes the experience that *male* youth may encounter. The RFs felt their story would be more valid if they could talk about the experience of having sex – “I believe that they need to see a vision [of sex], because you can talk until you’re blue in the face about abstinence but the kids aren’t practicing abstinence.” For example, there is a visual demonstration of how much a female dilates while giving birth. The men felt a similarly vivid description of an STD test for men would be an effective deterrent. RFs related that youth hear more about women’s experience in childbirth which led to one RF asking why “we can’t let the ladies hear what we go through?” They did realize why the program limits what they can discuss, but believe that the program would benefit from a more frank conversation on sex.

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4) How does NK meet the needs of participants as fathers *and* men?

NFs stated that being a man and a father are completely intertwined and that “your needs as a man are secondary always to your responsibilities as a father.” They both related that NK can be a positive growth influence particularly as a father. “[A]s a father it [NK participation] lifts me up and it helps me to focus on my role and what I’m supposed to be doing and how that looks to other people and how that might impact someone who is ready to have a kid.” NFs felt that talking to the youth helped them learn more about fatherhood and clarified their ideas on fatherhood. One NF closed by stating that NK “definitely...has the father part taken care of.”

“I know that we’re in a society where women kind of help out in that role or play that role, but we have to make enough money to support the kids and ourselves as much as we can.” NK Program Participant

Although the NFs were not sure NK currently affected their lives as men, one NF stated that “if you’re really trying to draw more fathers in then you should take those kinds of steps. Like doing things just for guys.” They described the camaraderie and support of other men as important components of their growth as men and they were aware that the male program specialist was seeking to do

more of these types of activities. They also discussed that part of being a man is increasing their own job readiness because they feel they are, “breadwinners for the most part. I know that we’re in a society where women kind of help out in that role or play that role, but we have to make enough money to support the kids and ourselves as much as we can.” NFs were encouraged that NK has a number of job readiness activities, but they noted that the sessions should cover a wider variety of topics.

The RFs initially focused on how discussing fatherhood with youth affects their own self identity as “men” and “fathers.” One RF noted that the NK program does an effective job of portraying to youth what fatherhood might entail, “When I was in school we had girls come over there and talk about pregnancy and I was like ‘whatever’. If I had another guy there saying ‘Hey, we go through stuff too’ ... I just feel like we get to express ourselves...” The ability to tell youth what fathers go through helps validate the RFs’ role as father. At the same time, the inability to relate the “nitty-gritty of it” - the experience of sex - and the fact that RFs must “sugar coat a lot of things” was perceived as inhibiting their ability to assist youth in understanding all aspects of having children.

Generally, the RFs related that NK had done a good job improving their knowledge and attitudes regarding fatherhood. However, they hoped to have more time to do “man-things” together. Though they have a bond because they are all fathers, they hope to have more opportunities that are not “father-based.”

Summary and Recommendations:

Focus groups with new and returning fathers to the NK program examined male perspectives on recruitment and retention. The groups openly discussed what they thought were effective practices of the program and also detailed where they felt enhancements could occur. The open forum, while providing information that can enhance the program’s effectiveness, indicated to participants that the NK staff values fathers’ opinions. Based on the focus groups with men in the NK program, the following actions are recommended to assist in recruiting and retaining fathers.

Fathers hope for the opportunity to do more “man-things” with other men in the program

Initial recruiting

All focus group participants emphasized the importance of positive personal interactions in their recruitment. Utilize this program strength in current and new recruitment methods.

Fathers learned of No Kidding through two primary means - personal contacts and Craigslist. Craigslist was particularly effective for the NFs, because of the ability to “easily” call NK staff to find out more about the program. Consider other ways of recruiting that utilize the initial positive personal interactions that all fathers mentioned.

In general, it is difficult to ascertain effective recruitment methods because the focus groups do not capture individuals who did not join the program. Further research that examines individuals that are part of the recruitment process but *do not* join would strengthen this finding.

Remuneration

Focus group participants emphasized compensation as a key factor in their decision to join the NK program. Consider ways the NK program can improve or expand compensation to increase the attractiveness of the program to young men.

Understand that the individuals in this sample describe the role of breadwinner as a key part of their identity as fathers and men. Compensation policies were not clear to the NFs during interviews. Consider developing clear descriptions of the pay incentives for those joining the program and be sure that fathers have a clear understanding of the pay structure.

Access to childcare and job readiness were also mentioned as possible program benefits. Consider offering expanded childcare options and a wider variety of job readiness activities. Program staff might also want to regularly discuss the plans NK has for expansion, and other employment opportunities as they become available at NK.

Program guidelines

Regularly continue to discuss and expand on program guidelines with participants.

Provide clear expectations and continuing guidance on the rules of No Kidding regarding what can be said during presentations. Consider a regular forum during which interns can frankly discuss content of presentations and offer ideas for change.

Detail rules involved in hiring male and female interns and apply them consistently. Detail how and under what circumstances interns are promoted to program staff roles.

Support dual role of Man/Father

Continue to provide opportunities for the fathers to bond with each other as fathers and as men.

Realize that both “father” and “man” are important components of interns’ identities. Nurturing both will positively influence individuals’ self-esteem, confidence, and satisfaction with NK.