



PASSAGES PROJECT

REAL Fathers participants  
Photo credit: Save the Children

# The REAL Fathers Initiative

Results from a Qualitative Evaluation of Scale-Up in Uganda

## I. PROJECT AND SCALE-UP OVERVIEW

REAL Fathers is a culturally-grounded mentoring intervention, which aims to prevent young fathers' perpetration of intimate partner violence (IPV), improve couple communication, prevent violence against children, and strengthen positive parenting. Piloted in northern Uganda in 2013, the intervention evaluation showed effectiveness on these same key indicators. From 2016-2018, REAL Fathers implementation expanded to a new population in northern Uganda, as well as a different region of Uganda: Karamoja. In both sites, the program was integrated into an existing community program: the Save the Children "Youth Initiative for Employment and Sustainable Livelihood and Development" (YIELD) program in northern Uganda, and their "Early Childhood Care and Development" (ECCD) program in Karamoja. REAL Fathers was adapted in the Karamoja region for a low-literacy, nomadic population, and a family planning module was added in both sites. Concurrent to the scale-up of REAL Fathers, a mixed methods evaluation was conducted to understand the effectiveness of the approach in achieving lasting change in relationships.

For the scale-up, young fathers, aged 16-25 years old — who were engaged in the YIELD and ECCD programs, cohabiting with a partner, and parenting a child one to three years old — were enrolled in REAL Fathers (see Figure 1 for study overview). They selected trusted elders in the community to be their mentors. If the elder was interested in mentoring, the young fathers' wives and community leaders validated the selection, confirming their capacity to mentor and demonstration of behaviors aligned with the program. Mentors participated in a training in gender equity, and the different facets of the program before implementation. Program activities included individual and group mentoring sessions, a community-wide poster campaign designed to motivate fathers through positive messages and demonstrate community support for changed behaviors, and a community

celebration at the end of the program to recognize fathers' accomplishments and encourage sustained changes. Over the seven months of implementation, participating fathers were expected to attend seven individual mentoring sessions, including three with their partner; seven group sessions with other REAL Fathers and their mentors; and complete accompanying homework. Each of the session pairs (individual/group) focused on a theme, such as positive parenting, communication, and family planning; complementary posters were displayed in public spaces to reinforce and normalize positive behaviors as new expectations for fathers.

To evaluate this expansion of REAL Fathers, the Institute for Reproductive Health (IRH) and Save the Children used a mixed methods approach over a period of 24 months, which included a quantitative survey and qualitative interviews. The quantitative survey, administered to eligible young fathers, was conducted at baseline (2016), endline (2017), and one-year post intervention (2018), to assess program effectiveness. More details on the quantitative survey can be found in the brief, [Findings from Scale-up Evaluation of the REAL Fathers Program in Uganda](#).

This brief is focused on the results of 39 qualitative interviews, conducted with men and women from the couples participating in REAL Fathers (20 from northern Uganda and 19 from Karamoja). The interviews were conducted at baseline (just before or soon after the intervention began) and endline, and focused on two thematic domains related to REAL Fathers participation: parenting and partnership. Each of the skills that fathers learned in the program were relevant to both of these domains, because these topics are often intertwined. The analysis sought to understand any changes in men and their spouses after their experience with REAL Fathers, focusing on decreases in IPV and corporal punishment; increases in couple communication and problem-solving; uptake of FP, and increases in parent-child interaction. Findings were analyzed by looking at experiences of change for participants in the two thematic domains (parenting, partnership), each with four findings (Box 2).

In both sites, the transcripts were analyzed inductively, looking at changes and commonalities between the baseline and endline interviews within the two domains. This brief summarizes findings from the qualitative research by domain and finding.

**BOX 1 | WHAT IS REAL FATHERS?**

Responsible, Engaged, and Loving (REAL) Fathers is a community-based mentoring program that capitalizes on the key period of transition when young men become fathers. The program works with fathers between 16–25 years old who are parenting a child one to three years old.

REAL Fathers aims to:

- Prevent IPV and harsh discipline (physical and/or verbal abuse) of young children
- Improve fathers' use of positive parenting, their confidence in using nonviolent discipline and couple communication
- Foster acceptance of non-traditional gender roles in parenting by fathers and the wider community
- Increase acceptability and use of voluntary family planning by REAL Fathers couples

**FIGURE 1 | REAL FATHERS STUDY OVERVIEW**



## II. REAL FATHERS AS PARTNERS — FINDINGS

Fathers and their partners discussed the changes they noticed in their relationship during and after participation in REAL Fathers. These changes were broadly grouped as those related to division of household labor among the couples; better communication and joint decision-making among couples; and new methods for resolving differences. Community pushback and support for these changes is discussed under the 'Parenting' section. Some respondents also noted certain behaviors that did not change, which are detailed in the section below.

### Fathers have taken on more household and parenting responsibilities

Fathers and their partners noted how the men who participated in REAL Fathers have contributed more to the household through chores and childcare, often when their wives are busy with other tasks. Some of the tasks fathers have taken on include gardening, washing clothes and dishes, cooking meals, cleaning the compound, and taking the children to the hospital. Many interviewees pointed out that the fathers have more time to contribute to their households, because they reduced their alcohol intake or stopped drinking altogether. One father in Karamoja shared that "[the community] couldn't believe I was the one who has changed to be so good. I help my wife wash, cook, fetch water, bath the children, and I spend time being with my children. I sit and chat with my wife, so we are all very happy."

### Couples experienced better communication and increased joint decision-making

Respondents reported better couple communication, which in turn led to an increase in partners consulting each other about decisions, such as where to live, plans for educating their children, and which family planning method they should use. Couples also completed specific tasks together, including gardening, cooking and washing dishes, disciplining their children, and taking their children to the hospital. However, some interviewees acknowledged that there are certain tasks that remain the sole responsibility of either the father or his partner. For example, one father mentioned that he still decides how many children he and his wife will have, and another father explained that his wife makes the final decisions on what food and drinks they purchase.

### Couples are better able to solve problems and communicate about their feelings

Many participants talked about their experiences showing their partner a yellow card or broken spear card. These are cards given to couples who participate in REAL Fathers - as a tool to signal couples should take a 'time out' if their disagreements escalate and one partner does not feel comfortable, or would prefer a pause before resuming discussions more calmly. Some couples described using the cards to help them

### BOX 2 | REAL FATHERS DOMAINS AND FINDINGS

#### Domain 1: REAL Fathers as Partners

- Finding 1: Fathers have taken on more household and parenting responsibilities, including chores and childcare
- Finding 2: Couples have experienced better communication, leading to joint decision-making and the sharing of household responsibilities
- Finding 3: Yellow cards/broken spear cards helped couples solve problems and communicate about their feelings
- Finding 4: Couples appreciated the advice of their mentors, and saw them as an important support during – and sometimes after – REAL Fathers

#### Domain 2: REAL Fathers as Parents

- Finding 1: Parents have adopted new strategies to discipline their children, replacing yelling and corporal punishment
- Finding 2: Fathers have engaged in childcare and spent more time with their children
- Finding 3: Couples' relationships with their children improved
- Finding 4: Couples experienced positive and negative reactions from their community after they participated in REAL Fathers





return to disagreements when they were calm. This led to more understanding and resolution of problems; specifically, the card acted as a catalyst to engage in discussion at a later point. The yellow card is from football, popular in northern Uganda. Football is not as familiar in Karamoja, however, so those couples received an image of a broken spear, which symbolizes peace and de-escalation in that culture.

### **Couples viewed mentors as a key support for changed couple behavior**

Couples detailed the lessons they learned from their mentors, including the dangers of alcohol consumption, how to resolve marital arguments, how to care for children, and how to build respect in a relationship and share responsibilities. Fathers felt that their mentors were trustworthy, and that they could share concerns privately on important issues related to marriage and childcare. A number of participants expressed a desire to continue working with their mentors after REAL Fathers ended. However, some fathers also reported difficulties with specific mentors, including challenges related to timing and logistical issues for their meetings, a couple of mentors' annoyance with participants' questions, and some mentors' refusal to meet one-on-one.

## **III. REAL FATHERS AS PARENTS — FINDINGS**

Fathers and their partners detailed the changes they made in their approach to parenting after REAL Fathers - as well as those areas that remained unchanged. These changes broadly addressed methods of discipline, childcare responsibilities, and the parents' relationship with their children. Some couples also detailed community pushback they experienced after making these changes. The data that addresses changes in parenting is summarized into four main themes in Box 2, and are discussed in further detail below.

### **Fathers have engaged in childcare and spend more time with their children**

Multiple fathers detailed activities they engaged in with their children after REAL Fathers, which included telling their children stories and chatting with them, playing games with them, singing and dancing with them, teaching them how to count, grazing goats with them, taking them to school, and buying treats for them. Couples have also undertaken some of these activities together, including playing with their children, talking to them, and teaching them various things together.

### **Parents have adopted new strategies to discipline their children**

Multiple fathers and mothers described the discipline strategies they learned during their participation in REAL Fathers, which included speaking calmly and explaining to their children why they misbehaved, telling them to stop certain behaviors, and advising them on how to behave properly. Some couples who used these methods explained that they differed greatly from their previous discipline methods, which involved beating their children, hitting them with sticks, and yelling at them when they misbehaved. Many mothers and fathers implemented these discipline strategies together, but some couples decided to relegate

discipline to one parent. Change towards positive parenting was not universal. Some parents who used corporal punishment in the past acknowledged that they still use it or threaten to use it when disciplining their children.

### **Couples' relationships with their children improved**

Many couples explained that they spend more time with their children now and have noticed that their children run up to their fathers when they come home, because they are excited to see them. Mothers and fathers also discussed how their relationship with their children has deepened. In addition, for mothers raising non-biological children, some developed a new appreciation for them, who they “no longer treat...like foreigners,” as a mother from Karamoja explained.

### **Couples experienced positive and negative reactions from their community after they participated in REAL Fathers**

Couples noted the many positive reactions to men's participation in REAL Fathers from members of their community, who were pleased with the changes in men's behavior. Specifically, community members recognized the positive changes men had made, including fathers caring for their families, and couples performing household and childcare activities together. They also noted how some fathers are drinking and fighting less, with their wives and with others in the community. A mother in northern Uganda noted, "My community at first reacted negatively by saying the program was a stupid one and it gives lessons/programs that were not helpful, but later they started appreciating; they understood and said it was then a good thing."

Though many community members appreciated the program, some reacted to the program negatively. Several fathers detailed the criticism they received, including being called a 'woman' and a 'houseboy' for sharing housework with their wives, and the confusion others expressed seeing them performing housework and childcare. Nevertheless, some fathers recounted how they had been able to change their peers' negative perceptions of REAL Fathers and the changing roles of husbands and fathers, by showing them the advantages of the program, such as saving money, and giving them advice about their problems.

## **IV. DISCUSSION — CHANGES THROUGH REAL FATHERS**

### **REAL Fathers supported young men to be better partners**

Interviewees noted that certain behavior changes tied to participation in REAL Fathers - including not staying out to drink with friends and coming home early and spending time with their families - decreased combativeness and IPV.

In particular, many couples emphasized that reducing or completely abstaining from alcohol had downstream impacts on a number of other behaviors, including helping husbands and their partners communicate better, reducing arguments and domestic violence, and helping couples save money. A couple of fathers noted that learning about the risks of drinking was one of the REAL Fathers lessons that specifically stood out to them.

Another change was improved couple communication, with one Karamoja mother (a participating father's partner) reflecting that, “[REAL Fathers has] removed fear because it has taught us that we are one, and that we are supposed to be united with our partner.” Multiple couples described how REAL Fathers had built skills that led to them solving problems together, listening to each other more, and having sit-down discussions when they disagreed about something.

In a similar vein, many couples referenced a specific REAL Fathers tool, the yellow or broken spear card, as an instrument they used to resolve disputes. Both fathers and mothers explained how the yellow/broken spear cards helped them resolve to discuss disagreements when they are calm, instead of reacting immediately. Mothers discussed using the cards to create time for discussions of certain behaviors, such as men returning home drunk, with their spouses. Fathers used the cards to initiate conversation for minor disagreements with their spouses, and to identify issues they may need to discuss further. “[I dream of] completely break[ing] the spear it goes completely away. That is what I dream of, health and also no quarrels in the family,” a mother from Karamoja revealed. Some mothers and fathers had not used the cards at all, which they either attributed to not needing them, or to not receiving them during the program.





A community where REAL Fathers was implemented  
Photo credit: Save the Children

This increase in couple communication supported by the skills, tools, and messages of REAL Fathers, led couples to consult each other on certain decisions, including budgeting, purchases, and what produce to sell in the community. Multiple couples discussed saving money for the rainy season, and whether they should take on more work to supplement their current income. Furthermore, interviewees explained that they and their partners have developed mutual respect for each other, and are now more transparent about their behaviors and feelings.

Many couples credited their mentors with giving good advice and teaching them important lessons, leading to improved relationships. Several mothers expressed interest in seeking out their mentors post-intervention, with others noting that their mentors had continued teaching participants after REAL Fathers ended. Some mothers noted that, during the program, their mentors had helped their husbands stop drinking - identified above as a key change - and had worked with their husbands to build good character. Some fathers reported that they gained a lot from one-on-one sessions with their mentors, because they felt comfortable sharing topics and concerns that they hesitated bringing up in a group session, such as fear of pregnancy, their wives' abuse of their children, and conflict with their wives. One father in northern Uganda expanded on this, "Always if there is any disagreement between us, he [Mentor] can and put us down together and we discuss and listened together. That is what I liked about him. Other people, they could not come, he was the only one who always comes." Though mentors were considered the most significant influence on men's behaviors, a few fathers named group sessions as particularly important. Young fathers credited behavior change to listening to other participants during group sessions, attending sessions, and doing homework with their partners.

### **REAL Fathers supported young men to be better parents**

During the interviews, couples explained the effects of using the positive discipline methods promoted by REAL Fathers, describing how their children were less afraid of them, and that their relationships with their children had improved overall. Several couples also noted that these discipline methods often fostered discussion and reflection between them and their children. One mother in northern Uganda reflected, "There are differences in a sense that looking at the past, we didn't know how to discipline children, we used just to bark at them, but nowadays we just talk to them calmly to stop doing wrong." However, some mothers explained that they still beat their children with sticks when they misbehave, and others talked about how they will use a stick to discipline their children once, with the understanding that they will not have to use it again. Other couples

explained that they may still threaten to beat their children when they misbehave, but will not actually engage in corporal punishment as a method of discipline.

A number of couples noted that fathers have been more engaged in childcare since their participation in REAL Fathers and have also spent more quality time with their children, playing and talking with them. In addition, couples noted improvements in their relationship as a result of the fathers' increased engagement and time spent with their children. Multiple fathers reported that the changes they made after their participation in REAL Fathers, such as refraining from corporal punishment, participating in childcare, and helping with household chores, was difficult at first, but became easier over time. As one father from Karamoja noted, "There's no more fighting or misunderstandings in the home. This project has taught us a lot on how to live with our women and children, it has really made us responsible parents."

Couples discussed their changed attitudes and feelings towards their children, describing how they wanted to spend more time with them and that their love for them had deepened. One mother from Karamoja explained, "Our children see us changed, they will also change when they grow up. They will follow our examples and these very changes."



### Couples experienced support and resistance from their community

Couples experienced both support and resistance from community members regarding their participation in REAL Fathers. Some participants described how they changed certain community members' negative reactions, like one father who helped his friend see the advantages of the program after telling him he saved money when he quit drinking. Many mothers described how some community members who initially spoke negatively about the program changed their minds after seeing how some fathers' behavior had changed their family relationships. Mothers also detailed how they shared their learning from REAL Fathers with other couples in their community who they thought needed help.

Some fathers described peer resistance and negative feedback, due to changes they made after REAL Fathers. Specifically, young fathers recounted how their peers or other men in their community called them 'babysitters,' 'women,' and 'houseboys,' because they were caring for their children and doing chores around the house. Certain members of the community also suggested that their wives were controlling them or overpowering them. Although some participants acknowledged that they worried about these comments, and did not initially engage in childcare because of them, many persevered despite the negative feedback, because of the changes they saw at home with their spouses and children. One father from Karamoja explained: "Some of my friends whom I used to go drinking with were like, 'Why are you doing all that work like a woman, that work is for a woman, can you leave it and come...to the trading center.' But because I knew what I was doing was for the benefit of my marriage and my children, I just ignored them and continue with the work I was doing. After, I managed to join them later, so explained to them on how good it's to help a woman because they also get tired like any other human being, so that's why am helping her..."

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The data gathered from these qualitative interviews reveal notable changes among the participants, and their approaches to spousal communication and childcare. These findings also support the quantitative study, detailed in Findings from [Scale-up Evaluation of the REAL Fathers Program in Uganda](#). Below is a summary of the main conclusions from this research, focusing on communication between couples, sharing of household tasks and childcare, and the reaction of the community to REAL Fathers.





Couples participating in REAL Fathers  
Photo credit: Save the Children



Men participating in REAL Fathers  
Photo credit: Save the Children

- Fathers have taken on more responsibility as a result of the program, which has improved their relationships with their partners and children.
- Drinking less or completely eliminating alcohol has been beneficial to both mothers and fathers, as it allows them to save money, spend more time with their children, and reduces IPV.
- Couples have engaged in shared decision-making and responsibilities with the help of their mentors, leading to more mutual respect and understanding in their marriage.
- Parent's use of positive discipline with their children and the elimination or reduction of corporal punishment has made children less afraid of their parents and more likely to spend time with them.
- Participants received both negative and positive reactions from community members about REAL Fathers, but interviewees felt confident defending the program and sharing what they learned with their community.
- REAL Fathers included sessions on family planning, and the topic was also discussed by mentors, but few men and women discussed this program element during their interviews.

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