

Research to Application: Framing and the “No Choice Option”

Introduction

As the nation’s #1 provider of fatherhood skill-building programs and resources, NFI provides guidance for practitioners and organizations on how they might be able to use the latest research on human behavior to enhance the effectiveness of their work with fathers. NFI provides this guidance in a series of blog posts called *Research to Application: Guidance for Practitioners and Programs*. The series is also available in the form of quick reference guides that you can download by clicking on the button at the end of the posts.

The series offers a platform for generating dialogue among NFI, organizations, and practitioners on ways that research can be applied to addressing pain points in serving fathers. This post is the second one in the series. (To access the first post, click [here](#). To access the second post, click [here](#).) It provides ideas on how you might integrate research on **no choice options (a form of framing)** into your work with fathers. Integrating this research could help you **help fathers** to be more persistent in sticking with the behaviors of an involved, responsible, committed father.

If you implement any of the ideas in this post, or develop and implement your own ideas, please share them with us at info@fatherhood.org. We’ll use your experiences to update this guide so it is even more useful.

The Research

Daniel Kahneman in *Thinking, Fast and Slow*¹ captures the research on the biases humans suffer from in making decisions, regardless of the decisions they make. He describes how we rely on two cognitive systems when making decisions. **System 1** “operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control.” We often call it our “gut instinct.” **System 2** “allocates attention to the effortful mental activities that demand it, including complex computations” and involves deliberate choice. We often call it our “rational side.”

We primarily rely on System 1 to make most of our decisions. The good news is that our gut reactions are right most of the time. But it is inadequate for making decisions that require a lot of thought and energy, which is where System 2 comes in. In addition to being inadequate for making complex decisions, the problem with System 1 is that it often leads us astray—and wildly so—which can get us into all sorts of trouble.

The reason it leads us astray is that it relies on *heuristics*, what we often call “rules of thumb.” These rules of thumb give us a starting point from which to base our decisions. The problem is that these rules of thumb are often wholly inadequate for helping us make sound decisions because, while they help us arrive at good decisions much of the time, they can bias our thinking in ways that lead to poor decisions in many instances.

¹ Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

One of the heuristics System 1 employs that biases our decision-making is called the *framing effect*. Our decisions are influenced by the way in which decisions are presented. Here's a great example from Kahneman's book:

- Research presented doctors with statistics about outcomes for cancer treatment in two different ways—survival rates and mortality rates—and asked them whether they would recommend surgery or radiation as the course of treatment. Specifically: the 1-month survival rate of surgery is 90 percent vs. there is a 10 percent mortality rate in the first month after surgery. Despite the fact that the data are exactly the same, just presented or framed differently, a much higher percentage of doctors selected surgery when framed from a survival than mortality perspective. Why? Because even among people trained to treat cancer, mortality is viewed as bad and survival as good. Survival sounds encouraging while mortality is defeating.

Think about your own life for a moment. If you were given a diagnosis of cancer and presented with treatment options, would you rather the doctor talk about your chances of survival or death?

The point is we're all subject to biases. The fact that I picked this research to write about is in part influenced by another heuristic called the *availability bias*. In the past year, I've read no less than 3 books on biases!

For the purposes of this paper, framing involves how practitioners present fathers with choices related to being an involved, responsible, committed father, regardless of context (e.g. one-on-one case management or in a group-based program) or topic (e.g. discipline, co-parenting, and child support). Before you read another sentence after this one, take a few minutes to reflect on how you present fathers with choices and write them down.

Chances are you present them with several or many choices to choose from. And each of the choices you present are ones that you'd be fine with them choosing. You might, for example, provide them with several choices for how they can do fun things with their children that they might not have thought about before and ask them to commit to doing one or more of them within a specific time frame. Fair enough. But did you also provide them with the choice to do none of them and maintain the status quo? I doubt it. After all, why in the heck would you want to give fathers an option to do nothing? Wouldn't that make you a bad practitioner?

To answer those questions, let's turn to [research](#) conducted by Dr. Rom Schrift and Dr. Jeffrey Parker on whether presenting people with a no choice option along with other choices makes any difference in how committed or persistent people are in sticking with their choices (not the no choice option). The results are especially important in working with fathers because one of your primary objectives for fathers should be that they are persistent (committed) in sticking with being an involved, committed, responsible father, generally, and implementing certain behaviors, specifically. Persistence is vital to fathers, particularly those who face challenging barriers to involvement in the lives of their children.

Although these researchers don't mention framing specifically, their research is all about framing.² Using a variety of experiments that addressed different behaviors, they found that offering a no choice option alongside other healthy or pro-social options increased the persistence of participants in sticking to the choices they made compared to participants who were given the same choices but without a no choice option. They found it critical that the no choice option was presented up front with all of the other choices, not before and not after the other choices.

Rules for Application

Use this simple and powerful framing effect to encourage persistence in fathers, particularly in those who face adversity. Here are two simple rules to follow when presenting dads with options on how to be an involved, responsible, committed father in any setting (e.g. one-on-one case management) and on any topic (e.g. discipline, co-parenting, and child support).

- Rule #1: Ensure that the no choice option is viable, even though it's not desirable. If a father happens to choose that option, it must not violate a legal agreement, for example, and not result in harm to the father or anyone else.
- Rule #2: Always present the no choice option alongside other options, not before or after.

Regardless of how you apply the framing effect, approach your effort as an experiment. Keep track of what works with fathers in general and with specific kinds of fathers (e.g. custodial and non-custodial) so that you can apply what works in future work with fathers one-on-one or in groups, and avoid what doesn't work. And last but not least, **share your results with NFI at info@fatherhood.org** so that we can improve future versions of this guide.

Resources

As you apply the framing effect to increase fathers' persistence in following through on their choices, consider reading the [article](#) on Shrift's and Parker's research and the books [Thinking, Fast and Slow](#) and [Nudge](#).

Don't forget to look for more posts and reference guides in this series!

² Interestingly and ironically, they use the term "choice architecture" when referring to how they presented choices. That term was coined by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein in *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (2008). I used the research in their book as part of the basis for the first paper in this series.