



National Center on Fathers and Families

BRIEF

NCOFF Briefs provide summaries of literature reviews, research reports, and working papers published by NCOFF and of emerging practice- and policy-focused issues in the field. This brief, Co-Parenting, is one of seven developed upon NCOFF's seven Core Learnings and a literature review written for NCOFF by Terry Arendell of Colby College. Designed to examine in-depth issues in the Core Learnings, the seven literature reviews were the centerpiece of discussion in the 1995-1997 Fathers and Families Roundtable Series. This series brought together researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to examine issues surrounding the NCOFF Core Learnings, or findings thought to be essential in working with fathers. Copies of literature reviews, Roundtable proceedings, and related reports are available from NCOFF in paper form, or via the internet (<http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu>).

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Co-Parenting: A Review of the Literature

Key Findings

- Shared parenting is atypical, even among married parents who live together with their children. Fathers do far less caretaking than mothers, and most men view their parenting involvement as discretionary. For the most part, father participation in child caregiving is greatest among married men and lowest among unwed, young fathers.
- Many men will remain reluctant to assume the responsibilities of primary or shared caretaking until childcare becomes genuinely valued and socially recognized. Yet, because of a gender stratification system that tends to place less value on work traditionally performed by women, childcare will not be considered important work until men participate more fully.
- Many men depend on their wives to facilitate their relationships with their children. This dependency creates barriers to father involvement even in married families and is particularly problematic for fathers who live apart from their children. Until more fathers learn how to initiate, maintain, and promote at least somewhat independent relationships with their children, co-parenting will remain out of reach for most parents.
- In nonnuclear families, father involvement declines over time; the impact, if any, of this decline or eventual absence on children's well-being is unclear.
- Father involvement, however, is important to children, their mothers, and society at-large as well as for men themselves. For fathers, involvement with their children helps to promote adult psychological development, contributes to self-esteem, and strengthens father-child relationships.

Recommendation for Research

- Research should develop a stronger series of work that informs us about conventional gender role socialization and the ways in which both boys and girls develop nurturing and caregiving skills.

Recommendations for Practice and Policy

- Parenting education programs that view fathers' participation as normative and desirable should be made more available.
- Policymakers should (1) reduce the adversarial nature of divorce by making mediation more readily available for divorcing parents needing to make custody arrangements and (2) make the workplace more family-friendly by providing more flexible work schedules, paid parental leave policies, and better-paying part-time jobs that include health benefits.
- The burden on working-poor families should be reduced by establishing income supports and community centers.

Co-Parenting: A Review of the Literature

Investigations of men's family behavior are still scarce compared to studies of mothering and family processes more generally. Relatively little is known about what resident fathers actually do, how their activities vary, and what the variability means. Even less is known about the parental involvement of formerly married fathers who do not reside with their children. Most research on fathering has involved White, usually middle or upper-middle class men. There is, however, a growing body of literature pertaining specifically to Black fathers in intact families. These findings indicate that race is not a significant variable in paternal involvement. Black and White fathers participate similarly; as in White families, mothers in Black families are the primary caretakers with fathers having some involvement. This review focuses on the characteristics of father involvement in the three most predominant family arrangements: (1) married or cohabiting fathers in intact families; (2) separated or divorced fathers living apart from their former wives and children; and (3) unwed, young fathers who usually do not share a household with their children.

References:

Harris and Morgan, 1991; Hossain and Roopnarine, 1993; Lamb and Oppenheim, 1989; McAdoo, 1988; Radin, 1994.

Father Involvement in Married Families

Few men have increased their household and childcare efforts significantly, even though women have increased their role as income providers. Mothers carry primary responsibility for childcare, regardless of their employment status. LaRossa's (1988) characterization of married, resident fathers as "technically present but functionally absent" describes the typical pattern of paternal participation. When fathers participate in childcare, they are more likely to engage in play activities than in any other type of caretaking, and most men who have increased their participation have increased the amount of time spent playing with their children. In general, women are dissatisfied with men's limited parenting and domestic involvement, while men are either satisfied or minimally dissatisfied.

There are not only few sanctions against noninvolvement but also considerable barriers confronting fathers who want to play a larger role in childrearing. Social institutions reinforce a traditional division of labor in the nuclear family in which men fulfill the provider role and women assume full responsibility for childcare. Still other barriers exist within the home. Mothers typically mediate the father-child relationship which Hochschild (1989) describes as consistent with women's marital role as emotional worker. Mothers' attitudes toward increased father involvement vary widely, and mothers sometimes resist what they view as an encroachment on their role in the family.

What distinguishes highly involved fathers from their less active counterparts? A number of researchers argue that the quality of men's relationships with their own fathers is the single greatest predictor of their participation with their children. This connection works in two different directions. The compensatory hypothesis argues that fathers seek to compensate for their own fathers' limited availability with high levels of parental engagement. The modeling hypothesis posits that men pattern their own parenting behaviors on their favorable recollections of high paternal involvement during their own childhood.

Researchers differ on whether fathers' psychological profile or perceived marital quality plays a larger role in determining involvement. However, fathering involvement is more closely tied to perceived marital quality than is mothering. Men who are unhappily married may withdraw not only from their wives but also from their children. At the same time, men with higher levels of self-esteem, who are more empathetic and oriented to the feelings of others, and who are more child-centered have higher levels of involvement with their children. In particular, men's capacities for closeness and autonomy and their psychological maturity appear to play a strong role in determining the amount of their involvement with their children. (It should be noted that psychological characteristics considered to be healthy tend to be associated positively with marital quality as well as high paternal involvement.)

Other factors that appear to play a role in determining whether a father will become highly involved with his children include the following:

1. Gender Role Attitudes. Some evidence indicates that men who are less attached to the conventional prescriptions of masculinity are more involved in parenting activities than other men;
2. Characteristics of the Child. Fathers are less involved with daughters than with sons, according to most research findings;
3. Social Situational Factors. Co-parenting appears to occur predominantly in middle and upper-middle class families. "Androgynous" parents typically are more highly educated and are often professionals with flexible work schedules. However, the research on working-class fathers' involvement in childrearing is conflicting; and
4. Time spent in paid employment. Much of the research suggests a negative relationship between the hours a father spends at work and the time he spends in caretaking. However, the relationship between work and paternal involvement appears to be fairly complex. For instance, Marsiglio (1991) found that unemployed men invest no more time in childcare than employed fathers do. Unlike women, men do not trade off work time for family time in a one-to-one fashion.

Among couples in which both parents have jobs, only a minority of men share parenting responsibility and caretaking fairly equally. Some research suggests that many men envision themselves more as mothers' helpers than as primary parents. The author of this literature review concludes, based on the findings she cites, that men's employment is not a sufficient explanation for their limited parental involvement.

Children's cognitive development and social competence and adjustment are particular areas influenced positively by paternal involvement. Other areas influenced by direct father involvement in children's rearing and caretaking are empathy, gender attitudes, and internal locus of control. Additionally, involved fathers influence their offspring indirectly by "providing instrumental and emotional support to their wives resulting in more sensitive maternal behavior and better child outcomes."

References:

Belsky and Volling, 1987; Cowan and Cowan, 1987; Cowan and Cowan, 1988; Dickstein and Parke, 1988; Grossman et al., 1988; Hochschild 1989; Kimball, 1988; Lamb 1987; Lamb and Oppenheim, 1989; LaRossa, 1988; Marsiglio, 1991; May and Strikwerda, 1992; Parke, 1985; Radin, 1994; Radin et al., 1993; Tiedje et al., 1990; Tiedje and Darling-Fisher, 1993.

Paternal Involvement Postdivorce

With few exceptions, mothers continue their role as primary parents after divorce. More specifically, more than 85 percent of children whose parents are divorced are in the custody of their mothers (Furstenberg and Cherlin, 1991, p. 32). A number of terms are used to discuss postdivorce parenting arrangements. Terms such as co-parenting, shared parenting, and parenting partnerships refer to the involvement of both parents in childrearing after divorce and encompass a range of cooperative efforts between parents. Shared or joint custody refers to legal arrangements and may or may not be used synonymously with the above terms. Shared parenting does not necessarily involve a fully equal division of childrearing responsibility and caretaking, and mothers continue to be the primary, resident parent even when joint legal custody is designated (Seltzer and Bianchi, 1988, p. 675).

Although infrequently practiced, true co-parenting postdivorce and outside of marriage involves a range of activities such as planning special events in children's lives and the sharing of major and day-to-day decisions and childrearing and co-parenting problems. The limited research in this area suggests that shared parenting after divorce is most workable and likely to be maintained when the parents establish the arrangement voluntarily, not when it is dictated by the courts. Parents choosing shared custody must have adequate incomes to maintain two households and must be innovative and creative since few models of successful co-parenting exist.

Noncustodial fathers' involvement with children typically declines over time. Whatever data are accepted as most

representative of divorced fathers' involvement, "the pattern of modest initial contact and a sharp drop-off over time is strikingly similar across studies" (Furstenberg and Cherlin, 1991, p. 36). Postdivorce paternal involvement is characterized by play and entertainment, not unlike fathers' general activities in families before divorce. Fathers who remain involved are more likely to pay child support; however, it is unclear whether satisfaction in the paternal relationship results in child support compliance or whether paying child support increases paternal satisfaction and a desire to spend time with one's children.

Some researchers conclude that children are affected adversely by their fathers' limited involvement subsequent to divorce. Other researchers argue that there is inadequate evidence to support unequivocally the assertion that children are affected adversely by their parents' divorce. In a study conducted by Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991, p. 72), the amount of contact children had with their fathers seemed to have little impact on the children's well-being. A number of researchers conclude that it is interparental conflict that affects children most adversely in divorce. Conflict with the former spouse is also a major deterrent to nonresident divorced fathers' parental involvement, perhaps because father-child relationships continue to be facilitated by mothers after divorce as they are in marriage. Although the effects of varying levels of father absence on children are uncertain, it is clear that many children suffer when fathers fail to contribute financial support subsequent to divorce, and only about one half of divorced fathers comply fully and regularly with child support orders.

Family involvement for men is predicated on marriage, and the termination of marriage represents a severing of ties to the entire family, not just to the former spouse. Thus, men's identities as fathers assume a marital relationship to the mothers of their children; when spousal relations prove to be transitory, so too do parental relations.

References:

Arendell, 1995; Furstenberg and Cherlin, 1991; Furstenberg, Morgan, and Allison, 1987; LaRossa and LaRossa, 1989; Marsiglio, 1991; Seltzer, 1991; Seltzer and Bianchi, 1988; Seltzer and Brandreth, 1994; Serovich et al., 1992; USBC, 1994; Wallerstein, 1989.

Young Unwed Fathers

Little attention has been directed to the study of young unwed fathers, at least until quite recently. Policy analyses, scholarly studies, demonstration projects seeking to provide services to young fathers, media campaigns designed to prevent teenage pregnancy, and legislative efforts aimed at establishing legal paternity have all emerged on the scene in greater numbers in the mid-1980s.

The United States has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy among Western countries, even though the national rates of pregnancy and childbearing are declining. Adolescent mothers often outnumber adolescent fathers since men are often older than the women they impregnate. Unwed fa-

therhood is most widespread among Black men, possibly because young Black men are less likely to use contraceptives and less likely to support abortion as an option in an unplanned pregnancy than White men. Ninety-one percent of babies born to Black teens are born outside of marriage whereas about one half of all White babies are born outside of marriage (Achatz and MacAllum, 1994, p. 2). In addition, the Census reports show that Hispanic adolescent fathers are rapidly increasing in number.

Adolescent parenthood usually has important adverse economic, social, and academic consequences. Unwed fathers of children born to teen mothers are the least likely to provide child support, and these children and their mothers are the most likely to be persistently poor. Much of the limited research on young unwed fathers involves men of color, particularly African American youth. This focus has to do not only with the higher proportion of Black men becoming early fathers but also with the location of programs aimed at providing services to young fathers. The usual sites for such projects are economically depressed urban areas where at-risk, minority youth reside disproportionately.

Generally poorly educated, teen fathers have few, if any, work skills. They have few parenting skills and are more prone to punitive, harsh, and abusive disciplinary behaviors than are other fathers. Moreover, teen fathers face a number of developmental issues (as do their nonfather peers), including the need to achieve separation and autonomy, even as they begin to form deeper attachments with persons outside of the family of origin. Young fathers, like older ones, find it difficult to distinguish their feelings toward their children's mothers from those about their children. Anger about money and child support orders and frustration over feeling displaced from the affections of their offspring's mother interfere with their relationships with their children.

Some studies suggest that a teen father's presence at his child's birth increases his chances of being involved with his child later. Teen fathers' involvement, limited from pregnancy and childbirth onward, declines over time, as does that of many married and divorced older fathers. Danziger and Radin (1990) found in a telephone survey of 289 adolescent mothers receiving public assistance that the younger the offspring, the higher the level of father participation. Economic contributions from young fathers also decline over time.

The Role of Government in Ensuring Paternal Support from Young Unwed Fathers

The author of the literature review discusses the increasingly active role taken by federal and state governments in attempting to hold unwed fathers to their parental responsibilities, namely income provision. The Family Support Act of 1988 played a key role in heightening efforts to establish paternity, with child support orders being levied as soon as paternity is established. Some researchers believe that as policies focus increasingly on holding parents financially responsible, further attention will be given to unwed fathers' parental rights.

A number of programs aimed at young fathers have acted as demonstration projects. The findings from three receive extensive attention in the literature: (1) Public/Private Ventures' Young Unwed Fathers Pilot Project, (2) the Teen Father Collaboration, under the auspices of Bank Street College of Education, and (3) the Philadelphia Children's Network's Father Re-Engagement Initiative. Each project evaluation lamented the cultural and social policy disincentives which undermine or negate young fathers' parental involvement. At this point, societal efforts are mostly directed at enforcing child support compliance, often at unrealistic levels, while neglecting the other contributions some young fathers might be able to provide. Programs geared toward young unwed fathers may enhance their processes of maturation. Smith (1993, p. 4) argues that "connecting these young fathers with their children has imbued these young men with a sense of the future, and by doing so, has provided them a compelling reason to change their behaviors and their lives."

The author of the review concludes that children's emotional, cognitive, and physical growth will be promoted only when both parents are capable of and committed to rearing their children. Greater societal support of parenting will help facilitate this goal.

References:

Achatz and MacAllum, 1994; Arendell, 1995; Bumpass and McLanahan, 1989; Danziger and Radin, 1990; Furstenberg and Harris, 1993; Gershenson, 1983; Joshi and Battle, 1988/89; Lerman and Ooms, 1993; Sander, 1993; Smith, 1993; U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1994.

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