

Perspectives on Father Involvement: Research and Policy

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In this report we describe the state of current research on father involvement and point to ways in which research findings might inform the economic and public policies that affect fathers. We do not intend an extensive review of the literature (see Lamb, 1997); rather, our goal is to integrate research and policies on father involvement into a framework that emphasizes the synergistic relationship between the two. A central aim of this report is to highlight limitations of past research and policies on father involvement and to raise questions that we hope will guide future efforts in this area. It is through this merging of research and policy that a richer appreciation of the ways in which different dimensions of father involvement lead to positive relationships with children will be realized. How can knowledge about father involvement, the predictors of involvement, and the influences of involvement on children be translated into policies that support fathers, families and children? How do current social policies guide the research questions that are (or should be) addressed in this area? What role have socio-cultural and historical trends played in determining the nature of research and policies on father involvement?

Social, economic, and political events of the past ten years have placed fathers in the national spotlight. As a result we are seeing a shift in the

way federal agencies collect data on fathers and how they design policies to promote fathers' involvement in the lives of their children. This shift has generated increased interest in what fathers do—economically, emotionally, and instrumentally—and has led to an unprecedented surge of work by researchers and policymakers concerned with child and family well-being. At the same time we have become aware of the limitations of national data on fathers. The federal government and private foundations are encouraging researchers, educators, and practitioners to examine all aspects of fathering,

Contents

Social trends and policies	2
Defining father	3
Fatherhood Initiative	4
Research on fathers	5
Characterizing father involvement . . .	5
Child outcomes	7
Predictors of father involvement	9
Public policies and father involvement .	12
Legislative policies	12
Public education and programs	13
Where are we now	14
Where are we going next	16
COMMENTARY by Ross A. Thompson .	27

including how men become fathers, the nature of father-child interactions, the motives underlying father involvement, the barriers to involvement, and the design of effective policies and programs to include fathers. This growing interest is, in turn, creating a new body of work that focuses on expanded definitions of father (e.g., biological vs. social), typologies of father involvement, and measures of father involvement and father-child relationships. This important work is beginning to link research to policy.

Major developments in social trends and policies have been a catalyst for the expanding interest in fathers that we see at present. One outcome of these social trends has been a reconfiguration of what had long been considered the traditional family—in which a father's role was that of breadwinner. Consequently, we are beginning to adjust both popular and scholarly conceptualizations of fathers, mothers, and families as we approach the 21st century. This reconceptualization includes adopting a more flexible and expanded definition of fatherhood (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, in press).

We begin this report with a discussion of recent economic, political, and social trends and events that have led to a growing interest in the father's role in the family. We review research on (1) the social roles served by fathers, (2) the different types of father involvement, (3) the child outcomes affected, (4) the direct and indirect pathways through which father involvement influences children's development, and (5) the factors that predict father involvement. We examine how public policies have affected father involvement to date and we discuss the current state of research and policies on fatherhood. We conclude with a set of recommendations for future research and policy initiatives that will be critical to advancing both theory and practice in this area.

Social Trends and Policies

Recent social trends are placing fathers in unprecedented circumstances. The most con-

spicuous trend during much of the 20th century has been the dramatic increase in female labor force participation. In 1950, 12% of married women with preschool children were in the work force; by 1983 that proportion had risen to half and by 1997 to two thirds of married women (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1986, 1997). Maternal employment has been accompanied by a parallel increase in the enrollment of children in nonparental care facilities. As more and more women enter the workforce, often with nonstandard work schedules, a lack of affordable and accessible child care is causing fathers to take on increasing responsibility in the care of their children. Although fathers have always helped care for their children, their role as care provider has only recently been publicly acknowledged. In 1993 more than 1.6 million preschoolers were cared for by their fathers while their mothers were at work (Casper, 1997; Casper & O'Connell, 1998). The number of single fathers with children at home has increased by 25% in the past three years from 1.7 million in 1995 to 2.1 million in 1998. Men now comprise one sixth of the nation's 11.9 million single parents (Bureau of the Census, 1998). This reflects a rising trend toward more men seeking custody and an increased acceptance by mothers, courts, and society that men can be effective parents either in cohabiting situations or on their own.

Another quite different social development that has placed men in the national spotlight is the alarming rate of father-absent families. In 1997, 24% of children lived with only their mothers (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998a). Almost 70% of women on welfare were unmarried when they had their first child. It has been estimated that the proportion of children who will live with only one parent at some time during their childhood will exceed 50% (Hernandez, 1993).

These divergent trends—the growing proportion of fathers-as-caregivers and increasing incidence of father absence—are creating social and cultural shifts in images of fatherhood and assumptions about men's roles. National cam-

paigns, the popular media, researchers, policy-makers, practitioners, and educators are engendering a new image of the emotionally involved father (Wilkie, 1993), while they also recognize the alarming escalation of father-absent households. As a result, fathers have been elevated from relative obscurity to a central position in efforts to understand and promote children's well-being. New types of fathers are being acknowledged—in step-, recombined, and cohabiting families. All of these family types call for men—even those not biologically related—to increase their involvement in the lives of their children.

These social trends have important implications for public policies aimed at regulating and promoting certain behaviors. To date, public policies have tended to slight fathers, especially those in nontraditional families; and even in traditional nuclear families, a father's financial support was viewed as the most important and regulatable form of his involvement. Most fathers who fell outside the traditional mode were ignored.

Low-income fathers have been especially overlooked. Because many are absent from families, they also lie outside conventional policy. Thus, not surprisingly, social policy for needy families has typically focused on mothers more than fathers. Such is the case of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (known as Welfare Reform). This new law created a block grant called Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) to replace Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). It provides funds to states to run welfare programs of their own design within broad federal guidelines. It encourages mothers' workforce participation by imposing work requirements on those who receive cash assistance for more than two years and by placing a five-year lifetime limit on mothers' eligibility for assistance. Half the states have set shorter limits. The new law also emphasizes paternity establishment for children born out of wedlock, increasing penalties for mothers

who fail to cooperate, and child support enforcement.

While economic necessity and the desire of some men to participate more actively in their children's lives is helping them become more involved, there are barriers. It is argued that "gender distrust" between men and women is increasing. As low-income single women strive to obtain employment, men are left behind, often unemployed and hence undesirable as marriage partners (Furstenberg, 1998). Policy-makers are now considering how to improve the prospects of these men. A plethora of programs (e.g., Baltimore Men's Start) have sprung up across the country to target men and provide job training and parenting advice. An academic organizations (e.g., National Center on Fathers and Families [NCOFF]) collects and disseminates research on fathers; advocacy groups (e.g., the Center on Fathers, Families and Public Policy) monitor the legal issues that low-income men face; and organizations provide a forum for people who run fatherhood programs (e.g., National Association of Practitioners). Activism at the community level and a widespread desire to return men to their families have motivated policymakers to include men in new policies. A "Fathers Count" bill (1998), introduced by Representative E. Clay Shaw, Jr. (who was the key author of the 1996 welfare law), would fund community groups, including religious organizations, to give low-income fathers job training and parenting advice and encourage them to marry.

Defining Father

In light of these social changes there is widespread recognition of the need to broaden the conceptualization of the father; however, the attempt to expand the definition of fathers has incited considerable debate among researchers and policymakers. Family make-up varies greatly—from single-parent, to cohabiting, to recombined. This variation implies, in turn, great diversity in father and mother roles and how

children develop and are cared for. In 1997, 68% of American children lived with two parents, down from 77% in 1980 (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998a). The percentage of children living with two parents is somewhat lower for children of Hispanic origin (64%) and much lower for black children (35%). That fewer children are living with both parents owes in part to a sharp rise in the percentage of births to unmarried mothers (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995).

In addition, many children, even if born to married parents, are likely to experience parental instability and divorce. It is estimated that one third of children will spend some time in a nonmarital or stepfamily before they reach the age of 18 (Seltzer, 1994). Legal marriage is increasingly preceded or replaced by cohabiting unions (Hetherington & Henderson, 1997) and 60% of couples in first marriages will separate or divorce; of these, two thirds of women and three quarters of men will remarry (Bumpass, Sweet, & Castro-Martin, 1990). Dissolution of these stepfamilies is also increasing: 54% of remarried women and 64% of remarried men divorce again (Martin & Bumpass, 1989). This complicated family restructuring is creating what has been called the “new extended family” (Furstenberg, 1987).

These trends corroborate that a large proportion of children will grow up either without their biological father or with a stepfather and that they will encounter changing family structures that call for adjustment to new and complex interactions with parents and siblings (Hetherington & Henderson, 1997). Consequently, we are moving away from a definition of fatherhood based solely on biology to one that encompasses other configurations.

A father then can be “biological” and/or “social”; he can be “legal” or “nonlegal.” A biological father is one who through either paternity establishment or self-report identifies a child as his own. A social father, on the other hand, is one who demonstrates parental characteristics that make him “like a father” to the child. He

holds the expectations and obligations that society prescribes for fathers—whether he is biologically related (e.g., grandfather, uncle), associated with the child through marital ties (e.g., stepfather), or otherwise socially related to the mother (e.g., in cohabitation, as friend). A husband can become the legal father of his wife’s child through adoption. A nonlegal father is one who cohabits with or otherwise has a nonmarital relationship with the child’s mother. Divorced fathers with joint legal custody have the right to make decisions about their children’s lives, regardless of where the children live (Seltzer, 1998). States may make a distinction between legal decision-making rights and physical custody—the latter designating which parent lives with the child.

In the case of stepfathers, because there are no clear legal or social norms defining their role (Hetherington & Henderson, 1997), negotiating their position as a new family member presents a significant challenge. In fact, stepparents have no legal status; it is the biological parent who bears responsibility for all facets of childbearing—discipline, consent to medical care, or access to school records (Ramsey, 1994). With a few exceptions that vary from state to state, stepchildren and stepparents are considered “legal strangers” (Mahoney, 1994). A stepparent’s legal rights and responsibilities change when he or she formally adopts stepchildren. Given the varied “types” of father, identifying those attributes that define positive fatherhood is crucial to understanding the influence of father involvement on children’s development across a range of social settings.

Fatherhood Initiative

The Fatherhood Initiative was an outgrowth of these socio-historical changes, serving as a further catalyst for the current surge of interest in father involvement. In 1994 the Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics was created to coordinate data collection efforts across federal agencies. On June 16,

1995, President Clinton issued a one-page memorandum requesting that these agencies assume greater leadership in promoting father involvement. Agencies were asked to review their programs and policies with an eye to strengthening the role of fathers in families and highlighting fathers' contributions to their children's well-being. A further goal was to improve data collection on fathers.

One activity of the Forum was to coordinate a series of workshops, held in 1996 and 1997, on male fertility, family formation, and fathering. This series came to be known as the "Fatherhood Initiative." Its purpose was to examine how fathers are conceptualized in social policies and how research and policy can jointly strengthen the father's role in the family.

The Fatherhood Initiative raised several important issues:

- (1) Because family situations and structures vary greatly, father and mother roles also vary in ways that affect how children develop and are cared for.
- (2) Although the father role has undergone substantial change, most social programs have ignored fathers' influence on their children, families, and community.
- (3) Fathers' importance to families is not diminished by differences in living arrangements or financial status.
- (4) Responsible fatherhood may affect fathers' own personal development and their intent to engage in economically productive and prosocial behaviors.
- (5) We know little about the commitment and existing barriers to fathering that low-income fathers experience.

The Fatherhood Initiative led to recommendations for improving data collection on the nature and outcomes of father involvement. Researchers and policymakers were urged to expand their perspective: to attend to both marital and nonmarital relationships, from the vantage of women and men; to conduct longitudinal studies that follow the process of fertility and family formation across the life course; to

improve data gathering on the motives, attitudes, and intentions underlying childbearing of men and women in all types of relationships; and to investigate further the meaning of fatherhood, the motivation underlying fatherhood, and the impact that father involvement has on child development in different cultural and ethnic groups (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998b).

Research on Fathers

Characterizing Father Involvement

Interest in the influence of fathers has grown steadily since the turn of the century and has accelerated since the 1960s (Lamb, 1997). Efforts to characterize father involvement and understand its effect on children's development have spawned four areas of research on

- (1) roles that fathers play in the family,
- (2) types of father involvement,
- (3) child outcomes, and
- (4) different pathways of influence.

Fathers' roles in the family. Traditionally, the father's social role within the family has been seen as mainly instrumental—as breadwinner. But fathers fill other roles, such as that of caregiver, and these roles are shifting as family structures change (Greene, Hearn, & Emig, 1996). Increased maternal employment, periods of economic decline, joint work schedules, flexible hours (including flex-time), irregular work schedules, part-time employment, job sharing, and home-based work all make it more likely that children will be cared for by their father, and for longer periods of time (Casper & O'Connell, 1998; Presser, 1995). Consequently, an ideal of the father as coparent is emerging (Pleck & Pleck, 1997).

A review of research on fathers as child care providers concludes that they are more likely to care for their children when family income is low and work schedules do not overlap (Casper & O'Connell, 1998). In one assessment of mar-

ried households with two wage earners (using the Survey of Income and Program Participation data set for 1991 and 1993), it was found that fathers are increasing their child care responsibility—most of it primary care. In 1988, 1.5 million fathers cared for their children; in 1991 this was 1.9 million, in 1993, 1.6 million (Casper & O'Connell, 1998). In 1991, 23% of men (1.4 million) with preschoolers whose wives worked were acting as primary caretakers, up from 17% in 1977 (O'Connell, 1993). In addition, in hard times the more income a wife has relative to her husband, the more likely the husband is to care for his children. Thus, changes in macroeconomic conditions affect the interplay of father care, work schedule, and family income (Brayfield, 1995; Casper & O'Connell, 1998).

The "availability hypothesis," that is, the more time a husband has to care for his children the more likely he is to do so, is supported by the finding that men who are in blue-collar jobs and are lower paid, compared to upper middle-class professionals, are more involved with their children. Thus, the combination of economic necessity and the steep cost of center day care finds men spending significantly more time caring for their children than they did 20 years ago (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997).

This trend of fathers assuming greater responsibility for the care of their young children is likely to continue into the next century. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that the largest job growth through 2006 will be in low-wage jobs, many of which entail night and weekend shifts and will be held more and more by women. Younger workers with less seniority are likely to get these shifts and are more likely than older workers to be raising children. Split-shift arrangements for care characterize one quarter of all two-earner couples in the U.S. and one third of all two-earner couples with children under age 5 (Presser, 1994). Not all father care stems from economic necessity, however. Some young couples expect to coparent, and some men are taking advantage of the opportunity to be the father they wish they had (Pruett, 1987).

Types of father involvement. Investigators continue to struggle with what it means to be an "involved father." A limited focus on father absence or presence, visitation frequency, or provision of child support reinforces the narrow view of father as economic provider. In contrast, the social construct of father involvement has recently been elaborated to include types and frequency of father-child interactions and the emotional attachment between father and child.

Three components of father involvement have been proposed (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987):

- (1) Engagement—a father's experience of direct contact and shared interactions with his child in the form of caretaking, play, or leisure;
- (2) Accessibility—a father's presence and availability to the child, irrespective of the nature or extent of interactions between father and child; and
- (3) Responsibility—a father's understanding and meeting of his child's needs, including the provision of economic resources to the child, and the planning and organizing of children's lives.

This three-part framework lends itself to further analysis of father involvement. Some investigators have distinguished between formal and informal forms of child support when assessing a father's financial responsibilities to the child (Greene & Moore, 1996). Others have distinguished among types of engagement, including play, direct care (e.g., diapering), and indirect care (e.g., washing baby clothes). Quantity and quality of care have also been analyzed separately (Parke, 1996).

As yet, it is unclear which of these components of father involvement affect which outcomes in children. Some researchers suggest that the assumption of responsibility, which is often neglected in survey studies, may be the most important component of father involvement (Working Group on Conceptualizing Male Parenting, 1997). In the case of nonresident fathers, for example, provision of child support is the

most important dimension of father involvement (Argys, Peters, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; Greene, Halle, Le Menestrel, & Moore, 1998). Others suggest that qualitative characteristics of father-child interactions are central (Easterbrooks & Goldberg, 1984).

Child Outcomes

The developmental outcomes in children that are most affected by dimensions of father involvement constitute a third area of research interest. Here findings are sometimes mixed and contradictory owing to variation among studies in the ages of children and outcomes assessed, as well as differences in definitions of “father” and the father’s residency status.

Different child ages and outcomes. Although father involvement appears to affect aspects of children’s development from the first months of life, researchers have yet to systematically assess the extent to which specific child outcomes are affected by specific forms of father involvement at particular stages in development.

For young children, a father’s emotional investment, attachment, and provision of resources are all associated with child well-being, cognitive development, and social competence (Lamb, 1997; Marsiglio et al., 1998; MacDonald & Parke, 1984; Radin, 1982). In some studies, father involvement continues to be linked to children’s abilities (e.g., IQ), taking into account other factors often associated with involvement, such as family income, neonatal health, and paternal age (e.g., Yogman, Kindlon, & Earls, 1995).

A father’s absolute levels of engagement and the influence of that engagement will differ at different points in his child’s development (Pleck, 1997). Paternal care, compared to other types of child care, during the child’s first year of life has a relatively large positive impact on developmental outcomes. But children in center care in the second and third years have slightly better cognitive outcomes than children who are cared for by their fathers (Averett, Gennetian, & Peters, 1997).

During middle childhood, father involvement has been found to relate to children’s school success. A recent analysis of data from the 1996 National Household Education Survey showed that father involvement (e.g., attending a school meeting, attending a parent-teacher conference, and volunteering at the school) in both single-father and two-parent families was positively associated with children’s academic achievement and enjoyment of school. For a nonresident father, it is active participation in his child’s life (including schooling), rather than sheer amount of contact, that makes a difference (Nord, 1997).

The benefits of father involvement for children’s schooling extend to adolescence as well. Adolescents who have a strong attachment to their in-residence biological or stepfather have been found to have better educational, behavioral, and emotional outcomes (Furstenberg & Harris, 1993). High father involvement and increasing closeness, more than involvement alone, protect adolescents from engaging in delinquent behavior and experiencing emotional distress (Harris, Furstenberg, & Marmer, 1998).

Different types of fathers. What do expanded definitions of father and different residency arrangements imply for child outcomes? As yet, the influence of nontraditional families on children’s development is not well understood. But new family structures challenge the notion that biological relatedness explains fathers’ investment in children. Some biological fathers can be quite indifferent to their children, while some stepfathers, or other father figures, can be extremely involved.

For children, stepfamilies present a mix of strengths and problems. While some children adapt well to a new family structure (Hetherington & Henderson, 1997), others have more difficulty. This challenge is best understood within a multidimensional framework, which encompasses constitutional factors of the child (e.g., temperament), shared family and extra-familial environments (e.g., SES, parenting), and

unshared family and extra-familial environments (e.g., peer networks). How these factors combine to affect father-child relationships, and how such relationships affect children's development, are yet to be examined.

With respect to differences in legal status, in the infant and toddler years child support is as likely to come from never-married fathers as from fathers who are divorced or separated. Over time, however, continued support is more likely to come from previously married men, perhaps because unmarried and never-married fathers are less experienced and may think they have less influence on their children than divorced or separated fathers (McKenry, McKelvey, Leigh, & Wark, 1996).

In the case of nonresident fathers, the role of father involvement for children's development is especially unclear. In many studies a father's nonresident status—whether through never being married or through divorce—has been shown to lead to a father's withdrawal and alienation from his child, seriously jeopardizing the child's attachment to him (Furstenberg & Harris, 1983; Nord & Zill, 1996; Zill, Morrison, & Coiro, 1993). In many cases a nonresident father's involvement is limited to the provision of child support. The relationship between child support and father involvement is complex, however; and it is unclear whether it is the legislating of child support that enhances father involvement or whether it is the inverse, that it is a father's own desire to be involved that ensures support payments. An evaluation of the Teenage Parent Demonstration, an intervention targeting teenage mothers and fathers in three inner-city areas, found that social and economic support appear to be complements rather than independent factors. A father who spends time with his children is also more likely to buy them necessities and provide monetary support to the mother. This trend notwithstanding, the vast majority of nonresident fathers in this sample provided relatively little economic support and social contact to their children (Ranganjan & Gleason, 1998).

A summary of several investigations of nonresident fathers, based on national data and large-scale surveys (Greene et al., 1998), revealed little evidence for the influence of nonresident father involvement on child outcomes. Yet many studies have found that child support is more beneficial to children (i.e., linked to more years in school, higher academic achievement, and reduced behavior problems) than other sources of income (e.g., Knox & Bane, 1994; McLanahan, Seltzer, Hanson, & Thomas, 1994). Such benefits can hold for absentee as well as resident fathers. Analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth-Child (NLSY-C) found that receipt of child support related positively to cognitive test scores, perceived scholastic competence, reading and math scores on standardized tests, and behavioral measures, over and above its contribution to total income; these effects vary, however, by race and reason for the father's absence (Argys et al., 1998; King, 1994). Some researchers have found a strong association between child support and child outcomes, especially in the domain of cognitive development (Graham, Beller, & Hernandez, 1994; King, 1994). Others have found significant child-support effects on school achievement, but not on measures of the home environment (Knox, 1996). Evidence also indicates positive effects of child-support income on cognitive test scores measured during adolescence, but not on later outcome measures such as educational attainment, earnings, and labor market experience (Peters & Mullis, 1997). The differential effects of child support dollars on children's outcomes may be linked to the mother-father agreement. Cooperative parents tend to spend more of their child support income on their children because they agree on how it is to be spent (Argys & Peters, 1996).

Different pathways of influence. A father can influence his child's development directly, e.g., through teaching in one-on-one interaction. Or his influence may play out indirectly, e.g., through his relationship with the mother or his role as breadwinner.

In keeping with the tripartite framework of involvement proposed by Lamb et al. (1987), a father's engagement with his child will likely exert a direct influence on development. Fathers, like mothers, establish an important attachment relationship with the child. They directly offer advice, information, guidance, and emotional and intellectual support, thereby inculcating knowledge, self-esteem, and a sense of security in children. Fathers' accessibility may likewise offer children a sense of security and attachment, although the effect of actual engagement may be stronger.

A father's responsibility, in the form of financial support, can affect his child through its influence on the economic structure of the household—thus determining, for example, whether or not the child lives in poverty. We know that poverty is strongly associated with low academic achievement, psychosocial problems, and delinquency and crime. To the extent that a father's economic support circumvents poverty, such resources can have long-term effects on children. Indeed, the absence of a resident father is consistently correlated with childhood poverty; the poverty rate for fatherless families is five times that of two-parent families.

Father involvement may also exert indirect influences on children's development through its effect on the mother-child relationship. In a study of 2-year-olds, researchers found marital quality, the quality of parent-child relationships, and child outcomes to be strongly interrelated (Gable, Crnic, & Belsky, 1994). Moreover, the relationship between a father and mother may affect a mother's behavior. Father involvement during the prenatal period has been shown to affect a mother's own health care during pregnancy—more so than factors such as maternal income and educational attainment (Anderson & Stanley, 1976). This association is strikingly demonstrated by the finding that the infant mortality rate, which is closely linked to mothers' prenatal care, is lower for married high-school drop-outs than for college-educated unmarried mothers (Sullivan, 1992).

For nonresident fathers the indirect effects of

father involvement have gained much empirical support. For example, child support payments influence parent-child and mother-father relationships, which in turn affect children's well-being by increasing father-child contact and lessening conflict between parents (McLanahan et al., 1994). Child support dollars may also indirectly affect children by reducing reliance on welfare (Knox, 1996). Some researchers distinguish between cooperative and noncooperative awards, finding that voluntary child support, compared to no support or court-ordered support, improves cognitive outcomes—perhaps because it has less negative effect on family process (Argys et al., 1998).

It may be that for many children high levels of parental conflict undo the benefits of nonresident fathers' involvement (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998). Differences in level of parental conflict across studies may explain why documented associations between nonresident father involvement and children's cognitive and behavioral outcomes vary (Furstenberg, Morgan, & Allison, 1987; Graham et al., 1994; King, 1994; Knox & Bane, 1994; McLanahan et al., 1994).

Predictors of Father Involvement

What factors support and predict positive father involvement? What factors obstruct involvement? Father involvement is likely affected by multiple interacting systems operating over the life course, including a father's mental health, expectations, family relations, support networks, community and culture, the child's own characteristics, and even public policies.

Mental health. Findings on the mental health of fathers point to its importance to involvement. Paternal depression and aspects of personality have been found to predict the quality of father-infant attachment and interaction (Belsky, 1996; Ferketich & Mercer, 1995; Jain, Belsky, & Crnic, 1996). Parenting stress has also been found to be negatively associated with security of father-child relationships (Jarvis & Creasey, 1991), quality of father-infant interac-

tions at 4 months of age (Noppe, Noppe, & Hughes, 1991), and father nurturance toward an ill infant (Darke & Goldberg, 1994).

Expectations about fatherhood. In another vein, fathers' expectations about being a father are associated with various measures of father involvement. In one study fathers' attitudes and reports about their infants and their role as fathers predicted a secure father-infant attachment at 12 months (Cox, Owen, Henderson, & Margand, 1992). In another study changes in father identity and the salience of fatherhood after divorce appeared to affect involvement over time (Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buehler, 1995).

Related to expectations is the notion of intendedness, that is, the extent to which a father intended or welcomed the birth of his child. Compared to extensive research on mothers' intendedness, we know little about this aspect of fathers and its relationship to involvement (Brown & Eisenberg, 1995; Henshaw, 1998). The research literature suggests that a father's "positive parenting" may be strongly associated with whether the pregnancy was intended (Brown & Eisenberg, 1995). A recent analysis of a 23-year panel study of mothers and their children found long-term negative effects of unwanted and mistimed childbearing on children's self-esteem, suggesting that parents may be less involved and supportive with children whose birth was unintended (Axinn, Barber, & Thornton, 1998).

Relationship with child's mother. Investigators have found that a father who has a positive relationship with the mother of his child is likely to be more involved in his child's life. Fathers in positive marriages are more likely to have secure infants (Belsky, 1996), positive attitudes toward their children and their role as a parent (Cox, Owen, Lewis, & Henderson, 1989), and low levels of parenting stress (Cowan & Cowan, 1987).

In a study of African American fathers, those who were more committed to their families fed and comforted their infants more often (Hossain & Roopnarine, 1994). In contrast, fathers who were involved in poor marital relationships had a

greater negative effect on their children's development than fathers who were not married to their child's mother. Only a third of the fathers with poor marital relationships had regular contact with their children, with less than a third of those developing a strong bond with them (Furstenberg & Harris, 1993). Other studies have found that unstable or hostile mother-father relationships interfere with an unmarried father's positive involvement with his child, whereas positive relationships support father involvement (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1998). Indeed, a father who fails to provide appropriate economic support to his child is quick to acknowledge resentment toward the mother of his child (Furstenberg, Sherwood, & Sullivan, 1992).

A mother's expectations and attitudes may also influence father-child relations. Research suggests, for example, that mothers may discourage father involvement in domestic and child care activities owing to their belief that fathers are incompetent in or unaccustomed to performing such tasks (Pleck, 1983). Both a mother's views about the importance of father involvement and actual satisfaction with his involvement predict the frequency of father involvement (DeLuccie, 1995). A mother's crucial role as gatekeeper in the case of nonresident fathers may also act as a barrier to father involvement (Allen & Doherty, 1996; Wattenberg, 1993).

Family of origin. It is also important to examine a father's relationship with other family members, friends, his partner's family, and with members of his own family of origin. In one study, men who received more emotional support from their work and family relations had more secure infants (Belsky, 1996). In another, fathers' memories of their own childhood experiences affected their involvement with their children and the security of the father-child relationship (Cowan & Cowan, 1987; Volling & Belsky, 1992). Similarly, in a study of Native Americans, it was found that greater participation by a father's own father in his upbringing was associated with greater paternal involvement (Williams, Radin, & Coggins, 1996). Men who want

to be actively involved in their children's lives may have difficulty if they had fathers who were poor role models or spent little time with them growing up.

Background and contextual factors. A father's economic status clearly affects his ability to provide adequate child support and may ultimately affect his relationship with both his partner and child. More-educated fathers play with and teach their children more than do less-educated fathers (Jain et al., 1996), and fathers' academic achievement is associated with the amount of time spent as primary caregivers (Williams et al., 1996). A father's job loss is associated with negative outcomes for the child, and fathers in poor and welfare families, particularly those facing chronic poverty, are less involved in their adolescent children's lives (Perloff & Buckner, 1996). Yet the effects of temporary unemployment are different for fathers of preschoolers. Fathers who are unemployed or who have a flexible work schedule are more likely to care for their children (Casper & O'Connell, 1998).

Where the father lives in relation to his child's residence predicts father involvement. For nonresident fathers, for instance, a father who lives in the same state as his child is five times as likely to provide formal child support, three times more likely to provide informal child support, and six times more likely to visit regularly (Greene & Moore, 1996). Among unmarried African American parents in Baltimore, only 13% of the young adults surveyed reported a strong bond with their biological father if he had not lived with them, compared to 50% of those who had lived with their fathers (Furstenberg & Harris, 1993).

Socio-cultural ideologies and prescriptions about father involvement may also affect fathers' views about their role as father and the investment they make in their children's lives. Although many women see themselves as advocates for children's well-being, men are less likely to define themselves in such an activist, or nur-

turing, role. Moreover, the prescribed roles of fathers—as breadwinner, caregiver, emotional nurturer, and role model—are likely to vary across ethnic and cultural boundaries.

Child characteristics. The father-child relationship, as with all social relationships, is a transactional process—a father's involvement will be affected by his child's characteristics, and the child's responses and behaviors will be affected by the father's characteristics and behaviors. "Different children induce responses from different parts of parental repertoires. The child in turn reinforces or fails to reinforce the parent behavior which is evoked" (Bell, 1968, p. 89). Little is known, however, about how child characteristics affect a father's reactions to his child and his investment in the father role. A father's involvement may vary with the child's temperament or gender, for instance. Some fathers may find it trying to engage in responsive and reciprocal interactions with babies who have difficult temperaments; others may interact differently with their sons and daughters (Cox et al., 1989; Lamb, 1997; Parke & O'Leary, 1976). Researchers have yet to investigate the role of child characteristics in moderating associations between paternal behaviors and child outcomes, though theoretical models have been proposed to explain how different children might be differentially affected by similar experiences (Belsky, 1998).

Public policies. Finally, as discussed in the next section, public policies have an impact on the amount, frequency, and type of father involvement. For some fathers, child support laws, which as they now stand are not linked to visitation rights, are a deterrent to child contact. Similarly, parental leave policies make it difficult for a father to take time away from work to take care of his child. Most employers do not offer parental leave, and when it is offered, it is unpaid (Parke & Brott, 1999). This lack of support may create a disincentive for men to be more involved in the care of their children.

Public Policies and Father Involvement

A purpose of public policy is to regulate or promote certain behaviors. Paternity establishment and child support enforcement, targeted mainly toward nonresident custodial fathers, have been key features of policies aimed at encouraging fathers to remain involved with and economically responsible for their children. In addition, policies affecting custody, welfare, family leave, and public education have an impact on the quality and frequency of father involvement.

Legislative Policies

Paternity establishment and child support.

Recent federal and state legislation is designed to strengthen child support enforcement and paternity establishment (Brown & Eisenberg, 1995). The Family Support Act of 1988 requires states to establish paternity for all children born of nonmarital unions and to require all unmarried fathers to pay child support until their children reach age 18. Summaries of the effect of this law report an increase in the percentage of children, born outside of marriage, who have both paternity established and a child support award (McLanahan, Seltzer, Hanson, & Thomas, 1995).

Successful child support collection is a key area of the current welfare reform law, which is aimed at helping public assistance recipients leave the welfare rolls and move into self-sufficiency. A 1984 legislative measure stipulated that families receive the first \$50 of child support paid monthly; the remainder would go to the state to help offset the costs of AFDC (Garfinkel, McLanahan, Meyer, & Seltzer, 1998). In contrast, welfare reform gives states flexibility in determining how they collect child support dollars, and consequently there is wide variation across states. While some states have chosen to continue or eliminate the set-aside, Wisconsin is experimenting with allowing recipients to keep the entire amount of child support collected (Garfinkel et al., 1998).

Custodial parents who apply for public assistance must take an active role in establishing paternity and pursuing child support. Individual states have developed strategies for collecting child support. For example, in 1997 Virginia launched the Virginia's Kids First Campaign, which has netted \$25 million from noncustodial parents who owed back support. Methods of collection included letters to delinquent fathers, arrests, use of boots to disable cars, and notices to suspend drivers and hunting and fishing licenses. An important aspect of child support legislation is that it is not linked to visitation rights. It is likely, however, that strengthening fathers' financial obligations to their children also strengthens their involvement with them.

Given this state variation in how child support laws are designed and implemented, it is difficult to get a national picture of its effects. Researchers anticipate, however, that some may have unintended consequences and might discourage family formation, paternity establishment, and father involvement. Father involvement may be jeopardized, for example, when a father is punished for nonpayment. In states that keep a substantial portion of the child support received or reduce mothers' welfare benefits, men and women often decide not to declare paternity so that any payments the father makes go directly to the child and mother (Achatz & MacAllum, 1994; Anderson, 1993; Doherty et al., 1998; Wattenberg, 1993).

Custody laws. Custody laws, which typically favor the mother, may curtail fathers' involvement with their children (Braver & O'Connell, 1998). Many nonresident fathers may resist supporting their children because they lack control over the allocation of resources within the resident parent's household (Weiss & Willis, 1985). As custody laws become more gender neutral, however, shared custody, which has implications for both child support and father involvement, is becoming more prevalent. Sole mother custody is still the dominant arrangement in divorce cases, but shared custody is on the rise (Cancian

& Meyer, 1998). Joint legal custody, in most cases, is associated with increased father involvement and can be beneficial for children and parents (Seltzer, 1998).

Welfare reform. The current welfare reform law puts greater emphasis on paternity establishment and encourages marriage and the two-parent family. This family structure stands to benefit children, even taking into account differences in family income, because, among other benefits, it facilitates a father's contact with his children (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). In contrast, children growing up in a mother-only family report higher levels of economic vulnerability and other negative consequences (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Parental leave. In 1993 President Clinton signed the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) that allowed parents to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave per year to care for a newborn or adopted child or another family member who is ill. The federal law further restricted these benefits to those working in businesses with 50 or more employees, employed for a full year, and working at least 1,250 hours during the year prior to the leave. Only about 10% of U.S. work-sites and slightly fewer than half of employed fathers are covered (Parke & Brott, 1999). Before the passage of FMLA, states had similar family leave policies (Klerman & Liebowitz, 1997). Paid parental leave in the U.S. is rare. In 1993 only 3% of medium and large businesses and 1% of small businesses offered parental leave (Blau, Ferber, & Winkler, 1998). Only 1% of fathers in either the public or the private sector are eligible for at least some paid paternity leave. The rates for mothers are not much better.

Who takes parental leave? Fathers are much less likely than mothers to take parental leave; also they take less time off. In the U.S. it has been estimated that although 91% of fathers do take at least some leave, they take on average only about 5 days of leave when their child is born (Hyde, Essex, & Horton, 1993). It is interesting to note in one study that when fathers took time off from work, they were more likely to use paid vacation

or sick leave than parental leave, which most often is unpaid. Fathers may not take advantage of family leave policies for various reasons: they typically earn more than mothers and cannot afford the loss of salary; the "daddy track" can be detrimental to their career; and many companies do not advise employees about their eligibility for paternal leave (Parke & Brott, 1999). Despite these obstacles, the percentage of fathers who take family leave is growing (Pleck, 1997).

Public Education and Programs

The recent cultural shift in how men are viewed within the family has major implications for public education and intervention programs. Targeted changes in behavior brought about by public policies can have an indirect impact on other outcomes of interest. Research, for example, indicates that men who have greater income, education, self-esteem, and parenting knowledge and egalitarian sex-role attitudes tend to be more involved with their children. Thus, public education efforts aimed at helping men become better fathers stand to benefit fathers and children. New concern for fathers has been the impetus for thousands of state and federal programs meant to help fathers, especially unmarried and adolescent males, through job training/search and employment, parent training, and school involvement (e.g., in Head Start). Unfortunately, evaluation of the effect of these programs is scant.

Programs for low-income men fall into two types. One endorses a "responsible fatherhood" approach that focuses on marriage as a primary goal. The opposing ideology provides men with training and education, which makes them more marriageable in the long-term. An example of the first, the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization, takes a cultural, faith-based approach, with marriage as an explicit goal. In contrast, programs like Parents' Fair Share enlist the support of child support officials, social service agencies, and labor agencies in providing men with counseling sessions, reduced child support payments, and job clubs and training classes;

marriage is not an explicit goal. A recent evaluation of this latter program, however, revealed no gains in employment or earnings and had only modest success in enhancing child support payments. It is possible that men enrolled in the program received little actual job and skill training (Ron Mincy, personal communication).

Where Are We Now? Current Research and Policy

As a direct outcome of social changes to family economics and structure, and in response to the Fatherhood Initiative, a number of new research and policy efforts have been initiated over the past couple of years. These ongoing initiatives promise to extend our knowledge about the role of fathers in their children's lives and the role of public policies in supporting father involvement.

Current Research Initiatives

Public attention and academic research on fathers has led to the creation of new research programs across the country. We briefly discuss four national initiatives, which are either ongoing or will be in the field by the year 2000. These are the Early Head Start Evaluation, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Birth Cohort, Fragile Families, and the Welfare Studies. These investigations improve past research on at least five fronts by

- (1) collecting nationally representative and longitudinal data on men in the context of families and communities.
- (2) collecting information from the fathers themselves.
- (3) collecting data from men of diverse ethnic and socioeconomic background.
- (4) representing partnerships between public and private organizations.
- (5) providing empirical data on how fathers, especially low-income fathers, interact with their children, what sustains the fa-

ther-infant relationship, and how public policies can foster responsible fathering.

The Early Head Start Evaluation is one of two national studies that will collect data from fathers themselves. It focuses on father-child interactions in the context of an early intervention program at three time points, when children are 14, 24, and 36 months old. Both biological and social fathers will be asked questions about their background and current social situation, their conceptualization of fatherhood and their interaction with children; many will be observed directly engaging with their children. The study will provide valuable data on how men interact with their children, how they view themselves in their father role and how they perceive their social and emotional investment in their children's lives. To capture the earliest phases of this process and to explore how the father-child relationship may change over time, an embedded study of newborns and their fathers and mothers has been added to the EHS evaluation.

A second national study that will collect data from fathers will begin in the year 2000. It is the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Birth Cohort, which is designed to track a nationally representative sample of infants at 6-month intervals from birth to 2 years and yearly thereafter until the children reach at least first grade. The purpose of the study is to assess children's health and growth and development in domains that are critical for later school readiness and academic achievement. The study will address children's transitions to nonparental care and early education programs, kindergarten, and first grade. It will provide data on the relationship between children's early care and education experiences and their growth in key developmental domains.

The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study brings together three areas of great interest to policymakers and researchers: nonmarital childbearing, welfare reform, and the role of fathers. The study will follow a cohort of unwed parents and their children. It will provide previously unavailable information on the conditions

and capabilities of new unwed fathers, on the relationship between unwed mothers and fathers, on the factors that push new unwed parents together or apart, on how public policies affect parents' behavior and living arrangements, and on the consequences of new welfare regulations for parents, children, and society.

Three major studies, collectively known as the Welfare Studies and currently underway, will provide longitudinal, ethnographic, and qualitative data on how welfare reform affects poor children and their families—that is, will it hurt them or harm them? These are Children, Families, and Welfare Reform: A Multi-City Study (Three City); Los Angeles Study of Families and Communities; and New Hope, a study of welfare in Milwaukee. An important component of these longitudinal studies is how families—fathers, mothers, and children—negotiate the new policies and how this new context influences the way they relate to one another.

In addition to these research initiatives, there is a national effort to address the “male undercount.” Statistical agencies are now determined to include men in all national surveys and, in the interest of children, to improve the information base on fathers, from basic demographics to family process. The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 Cohort (1998), for example, plans to develop a set of questions on parenting for young men and women who will become parents in the next decade. The Panel Study of Income Dynamics (Hill, 1992) is asking the same questions of fathers as they do of mothers and has plans to expand data on nonresident fathers' involvement with their children. The Census Bureau and the National Center on Health Statistics (NCHS) are working on a couple of methodology projects to incorporate men. The National Survey of Family Growth (NCHS, 1998) has funding to add men to their next round of data collection. It will survey approximately 7,200 men by the year 2000. The National Survey of Family Households (1998) also has father-related questions.

Policy Directions

There are strong grounds for hope that public policy is ready to confront many of the issues raised here. The Fatherhood Initiative has brought about a shift in how federal agencies view fathers, collect data, and design policy. Policymakers have gone beyond viewing fathers narrowly as providers only, to recognizing them in their own right as vital contributors to their children's development.

This new perspective is reflected in the five principles that currently shape policies on fathers in the Department of Health and Human Services:

- All fathers can be important contributors to the well-being of their children.
- Parents are partners in raising their children, even when they do not live in the same household.
- The roles fathers play in families are diverse and related to cultural and community norms.
- Men should receive the education and support necessary to prepare them for the responsibility of parenthood.
- Government can encourage and promote father involvement through its programs and through its own workforce policies, especially for low-income fathers.

In addition to these national goals, most states have recently undertaken strategic initiatives, with welfare reform a major impetus, to promote responsible fatherhood and to increase public awareness of the importance of fathers' involvement in the lives of their children. They have convened statewide summits and conferences and sponsored statewide media campaigns to promote positive father involvement. These efforts have focused on all fathers, including fathers in two-parent families, teen fathers, non-custodial fathers (both divorced and never married), and single fathers. The National Governors' Association has published a list of the best state programs aimed at promoting responsible fathering. Thirty governors submitted descrip-

tions of the best fatherhood initiatives. These fall into six categories: services for low-income, noncustodial fathers; parenting skills training; public awareness campaigns; commissions; comprehensive funding streams; and, prevention of premature fatherhood.

Some policy analysts and researchers express concern that such initiatives rarely include evaluation, that they too often proceed without evidence on what works best for which fathers (Knitzer, Brenner, & Gadsden, 1997). Nevertheless, states have an excellent opportunity to innovate and lead in the promotion of responsible fatherhood. Government and philanthropic support has created a network of programs across the country that seek to raise the income of low-income men and strengthen their ties to their children. Nearly all states given substantial federal welfare-to-work grants this year have pledged to include fathers in their programs. Rigorous evaluation research is now needed to assess the effectiveness of these efforts.

Where Are We Going Next? Directions in Research and Policy

To date, most of the existing research on fathers, and in turn the policies that are relevant to fathers, have been based on small and select samples and on unitary measures of father involvement, sometimes assessed at a single point in time. What we know about fathers we have learned from small studies of middle-class men and from studies of mothers. Consequently the evidence on fathers is limited. We need research that directly addresses policy-related questions and provides data that can be used to design and implement programs. How can social policies and programs encourage father involvement, beyond child support, and best foster the father-child relationship?

A New Research Agenda

One goal of the current research agenda on father involvement should be to inform social policy and enhance services to fathers and families. To address these shortcomings, future research needs to:

- (1) extend investigation to low-income fathers from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds;
- (2) elicit the perspectives of fathers themselves, rather than relying on data from mothers as proxies for fathers;
- (3) consider the multidimensional nature of father involvement rather than a unitary measure, like “presence” or “absence”;
- (4) track the changing nature and influence of father involvement over time;
- (5) commence in the prenatal or infancy period; and
- (6) directly address social policy.

Fortunately, many of the research initiatives described above promise to address these gaps in current knowledge.

Extending research to low-income and ethnically diverse populations. Most of what we know about the father-child relationship comes from studies of middle-class families, a sample more of convenience than of import for families most targeted by social programs and public policy (Greene et al., 1996). What studies there are of minority or economically disadvantaged fathers have focused largely on negative aspects of behavior and negative outcomes. In addition, studies of men have generally excluded those who have unstable housing, do not live with their families, or are homeless. This “male undercount” calls into question the validity of the information we have about fathers. Research on diverse populations, on hard-to-reach fathers, and on potential strengths in less advantaged families is much needed.

Eliciting the father perspective. In much of the research mothers have served as proxies for fathers. Few studies have asked fathers to talk about their commitment to fatherhood, their

involvement with their children, or what services they consider needed. We need studies that investigate fathers directly, with samples that represent populations until now neglected.

Taking a multidimensional approach. As noted earlier, father involvement is best conceptualized as a multidimensional construct, rather than as merely father absence or presence. Researchers also need to consider relations between different types of involvement. Some studies, for example, indicate a strong relationship between father accessibility and responsibility (Arditti & Keith, 1993; Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983; King, 1994; Seltzer, Schaeffer, & Charing, 1989; Sonenstein & Calhoun, 1990). Other studies of African American families have found an inverse relationship between accessibility and responsibility, with fathers appearing less involved and having less direct contact with their children because they are working hard to meet family needs (Boyden, 1993). Future studies and social policies should consider the specific influence of and relations among different types of father involvement and consider the ways to best support and encourage father involvement at many levels.

Adopting a developmental perspective. Longitudinal investigations of father-child interactions, with their antecedents and consequences, are rare. But particularly striking is the finding that low-income fathers (such as adolescent fathers and fathers of children raised on AFDC) are most involved with their children shortly after birth and much less so as their children grow older (Lerman, 1993; Perloff & Buckner, 1996). In the case of teen fathers, although two thirds are actively involved with their children some time after birth, this contact does not last long (Marsiglio, 1987). In one study almost half of new adolescent fathers visited their child every week, and nearly one quarter had daily contact; but by the time children were in school, less than one quarter of fathers saw them weekly (Lerman, 1993). In a longitudinal follow-up of a study in Baltimore, 80% of children received some child support at age 1, 33% at age 5, and only 17% by

mid-adolescence (Furstenberg & Harris, 1993). Longitudinal studies are needed to identify factors that most affect changes to involvement over time.

Focusing on the early transition to fatherhood. Prospective studies that consider father involvement beginning in the prenatal and early infancy periods are also needed. Father involvement has its roots in the initial expectations and life circumstances surrounding fertility and birth. We know little about this period, or about its significance for father involvement over time.

Evidence suggests that periods of transition in development present critical points of evaluation, renewed self-definition, adjustment, and reconstruction, which can lead to changes in an individual's relationship with others (Ruble, 1994); the transition to fatherhood has rarely, if ever, been considered in this light. One stage model proposes three key periods of change and adaptation to major transitions (Ruble, 1994):

- (1) a period of conflict and uncertainty early on, termed "onset";
- (2) a period of adaptation and consolidation, "change"; and
- (3) a period of stabilization over the longer time frame, "equilibrium."

This theoretical framework could be useful to understanding the transition to parenthood, which can be stressful for all parents. Of special interest is the adaptation of a father to his new role and whether and how his initial adjustment affects his long-term commitment to his child.

Integrating Research and Social Policy

Research and social policy have been only recently integrated in ways that might effectively meet the needs of children and fathers. It is urgent to understand the consequences of greater or lesser levels of father involvement for children's development and to identify effective programs and policies to promote positive father-child relationships.

In about five years, national data on father involvement from investigations such as EHS,

ECLS-B, and Fragile Families will be available. These national-level data will address many of the shortcomings of past research and should extend our knowledge about the antecedents and consequences of father involvement for children, especially those from underrepresented, low-income families. These data are being collected in the context of welfare reform and hence will have policy implications. Taken together, this new knowledge source will give us a better understanding of what it means to be a father under economic strain, which will be critical in developing and implementing policies for low-income fathers. Moreover, findings from these studies should be integrated into extant developmental theories as we revisit how changes to family structures and the roles of fathers affect children's lives.

Child support and paternity establishment policies. Some policy analysts have suggested that paternity establishment programs meant to support rather than hinder fathers' involvement should include education and job training, public outreach and education, and support and assistance for responsible parenting (Achatz & MacAllum, 1994; Danziger, Kastner, & Nickel, 1993). Similarly, researchers have proposed that child support programs need to recognize in-kind support and introduce flexible levels of support (Danziger et al., 1993; Sullivan, 1993). Broadening the definition of child support to include the provision of food and clothing, time spent with children, and child care might encourage fathers to connect more with their children and contribute to their long-term development.

Custody agreements. As custody laws become gender neutral, shared custody promises to become more common. Unless mothers and fathers deal with each other amicably, however, any arrangement is likely to fail and have negative consequences for children. Some researchers have proposed mediation as well as giving absent fathers more rights (Braver & O'Connell, 1998). Visitation rights, for example, could be tied to child support payment, which is currently not

the case. Making visitation and custody rights more explicit and enforcing them might also help keep fathers involved.

Welfare reform. The consequences of welfare reform for men, women, and children are yet to be known. Work requirements may open employment opportunities for some women that will benefit their children, but for others these requirements may result in greater hardship and fewer resources. For some men the added stress to mothers who are already in distress may afford an opportunity to play an enlarged role in the well-being of the family. Men have come to represent an untapped resource for welfare families moving into the workforce. Yet other men who lack employment and other resources may become more alienated from their families.

Welfare reform programs are, in fact, showing little effect on fathers thus far. Moreover, we lack data on the intended promotion of marriage and the two-parent family. Evidence about the effect of AFDC benefits on family structure is mixed (see Moffit, 1992 for a review). This outcome, then, would have to be evaluated in the context of recent demographic trends—in marriage, divorce, fertility—and other contextual characteristics, such as family process, father absence (either psychological or physical), and type of father involvement in relationship to the child's stage of development. The question for policymakers and researchers is whether welfare laws will increase the rate of marriage, and if this happens, how stable those unions will be. How will children fare in these families?

Parental leave. As the cultural image of the father as child care provider becomes more acceptable, how might policies on paternal leave encourage a father's involvement in the care of his new infant? Some anecdotal evidence suggests that the private sector is beginning to make the work place more father-friendly and to implement policies that encourage men to be part of their children's lives without sacrificing their careers. A recent publication, for example, listing the 100 best companies for the worker, includes progressive employee policies for mothers and

fathers as a criterion. Courts are also beginning to tip the balance toward more favorable consideration of fathers. In a recent case in Virginia, a father was awarded damages for being fired from work when he took leave to care for his sick child.

Mothers' role as gatekeeper. Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners have to work together to identify the circumstances under which it is unsuitable to encourage a father's involvement or re-involvement in his child's life. Programs and policies also need to address father-mother conflict, in that research indicates that poor relationships are strong barriers to father involvement. When should a mother's role as gatekeeper be respected, and when is it inappropriate? How do we address the harsh realities of domestic violence and child abuse and best protect victims but still minimize false accusations?

Conclusions

Recent socio-historical trends, including changes in mothers' workforce participation and changing family structures, have placed fathers at the center of research efforts and policy debates. Today many fathers are more involved in their children's lives than their own fathers were, while others are increasingly distancing themselves from their children. Some children experience warm relationships with their fathers; others experience inconsistent, unstable support; others will be adversely affected by destructive fathering behavior; still others will lose their fathers early in their development. Some children will experience high levels of involvement from males other than their biological fathers, such as grandfathers and uncles. For boys and girls, these early experiences will no doubt influence, for better or worse, their social and cognitive adjustments throughout life as well as their expectations about their future roles as fathers and mothers. To what extent can researchers and policymakers work together to

learn about and support these developmental processes?

Although we know that positive father involvement enhances developmental outcomes in children, there still exists a noteworthy gap between what we currently know about father involvement and what we still need to learn—particularly with respect to the effects of different dimensions of father involvement on specific abilities in children at specific developmental periods. We also know little about the process by which fathers and children, in the context of families, establish a positive relationship. Moreover, research on the nature, antecedents, and outcomes of father involvement, particularly in underrepresented, low-income and minority families remains limited. At present, researchers have only begun to examine some of these issues in large-scale national studies that will undoubtedly unearth a wealth of information about the nature, determinants, and consequences of father involvement.

Most notably, the integration of research and policy on fathers is yet in its infancy. Researchers should be encouraged to attend to constructs and variables that not only have theoretical relevance for policy and practice but can also be readily translated and incorporated into policy and program initiatives. Social trends are useful markers that help us gain a broad picture of the ecological context in which families live. Both researchers and policymakers need to be cognizant of the dynamic interplay between research and policy, and of how knowledge about father involvement and well-targeted policy initiatives together feed the process of support to all family members, most notably children. How best might social policies ensure that the next generation of fathers receives more support and recognition than in the past? What role do schools and other community institutions have in preparing boys for fatherhood, and girls in their expectations about the future fathers of their children? What role will society play in encouraging and promoting positive father-child relationships in the 21st century?

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Drawing the Face of Contemporary Fatherhood

Ross A. Thompson

The publication of this thought-provoking essay by Tamis-LeMonda and Cabrera is timely. Fatherhood has always been a central concern of developmental scientists, but never has it been such a controversial topic of public and policy debate. Images of the “dead-beat dad,” the involved father, and the absent parent are familiar cultural symbols of the different meanings of fatherhood to the contemporary family. Family scholars, policymakers, and commentators with very different views of family life and children’s needs debate the meaning and significance of fatherhood to society. These debates are important to developmental scientists who study fathers because they frame the context in which research findings are interpreted, disseminated, and applied by those who shape family policy.

On one side of the “national family wars” (Popenoe, 1993) are scholars like Blankenhorn (1995) and Popenoe (1996), who urge a reinvigoration of traditional fatherhood as the answer to the progressive “deinstitutionalization of marriage” and decline of the two-parent family in recent decades (see also Whitehead, 1997). They argue that a paternal recommitment to marriage and childrearing would benefit children socially and economically by reducing the escalation of nonmarital childbearing, curbing divorce, and keeping fathers involved with their children when divorce occurs. A reinvigorated fatherhood would also benefit men, they argue, because a commitment to their partners and offspring reduces the propensity for dangerous and deviant behavior in early adulthood and encourages instead fidelity to nurturance and care.

On the other side are scholars like Coontz (1997) and Stacey (1996) who seek instead cultural acceptance of diverse family forms which may or may not include fathers, but which support children’s well-being. Recently, for example, Silverstein and Auerbach (1999) have argued that neither fathers nor marriage are central to healthy child development and advocate public policies that support father-child relationships independent of the marital relationship. Other scholars (e.g., Carbone, 1994; Fineman, 1991), concerned about the “feminization of poverty” that has accompanied rising divorce rates and nonmarital childbearing, underscore the importance of policies that ensure fathers’ economic support of offspring and their primary caregivers (typically mothers), such as through more rigorous child support enforcement.

Both sides of the debate portray “father involvement” in the context of very different images of the family conditions that support children. It is not surprising that such heated debate centers on the meaning and significance of contemporary fatherhood. As noted by Tamis-LeMonda and Cabrera, significant changes in society have altered fathering roles and responsibilities, including the growth of dual-earner families, the increase of nonmarital childbearing and childrearing, changes in the social construction of gender roles, high rates of divorce and remarriage, a shift to a postindustrial service economy, broadened reproductive decisionmaking, and changes in social values concerning the family. Each has altered traditional ways of viewing the connection between fatherhood and marriage, economic provision, and child-rearing responsibility.

Moreover, fathers themselves have contributed to contemporary debate about the meaning of fatherhood to the family. Although many men enthusiastically embrace the ideal of the committed father, many men remain derelict in their responsibilities to offspring. Even though fidelity to visitation has increased meaningfully in recent years (Kelly, 1994; Thompson & Laible, 1999), too many children lose contact with their nonresidential fathers in the years following divorce. Even though the economic support of children has improved with new child support enforcement procedures, many children remain in need and many fathers do not pay what they are capable of providing (Meyer, 1999). The tension between contemporary cultural images of the involved, nurturant father (“good dads”) and the absent, deadbeat dad (“bad dads”) reflects how contemporary fatherhood has become less socially defined, more individually crafted, and more optional than for past generations of men (Furstenberg, 1988).

Research, Values, and Policy on Fatherhood

Fatherhood is, in short, a research concern with significant public and policy implications. Beliefs about the importance of father involvement reflect broader values about the nature of the family and the needs of children. These public and policy concerns provide a context for Tamis-Lemonda and Cabrera’s discussion of father involvement, and add weight to many of their recommendations for research and policy. Their discussion suggests, in particular, three lessons for developmental scientists about the interaction between research, values, and policy concerning fatherhood and the family (Thompson & Wyatt, 1999).

First, research on fatherhood can contribute to a better awareness of the diverse dimensions of contemporary fatherhood than are typically appreciated in public discourse about “good dads” and “bad dads.” This is one of the most important

contributions of this article as the authors convincingly underscore how contemporary fatherhood is shaped by economic trends, marital relations, personal history, social values, public policies, and many other influences. The importance of moving beyond simple, stereotypical portrayals of fathers is also reflected in some of the authors’ recommendations for future research, which include focusing on how fathers themselves perceive and experience fatherhood, and exploring the multidimensional nature of father involvement beyond their mere presence or absence in a child’s life. In advancing these research perspectives, developmental scientists not only contribute to a better understanding of fatherhood but can also reframe public discourse about father involvement.

Nonresident fathers have been a cause of concern, for example, because their visits with offspring typically decline in frequency over time but, equally important, because visitation frequency seems to have little relation to measures of child well-being. When the *quality* of nonresident father involvement is considered, however, a different picture emerges (see Thompson & Amato, 1999). In a recent meta-analysis of research on nonresident fathers, Amato and Gilbreth (1999) found that two dimensions of postdivorce fatherhood were significantly predictive of children’s well-being: “authoritative parenting” (reflected in activities such as noncoercive discipline, listening to children’s problems, and giving advice) and “feelings of closeness” (indexing the affection and mutual respect between fathers and their children). Authoritative parenting was, in fact, a more significant predictor of children’s well-being than was the economic support provided by fathers, and this suggests the value of public policies designed to ensure that nonresidential fathers and children can maintain the kinds of shared activities that are typical of parent-child relationships in intact families (Thompson, 1994). Studies indicating that fathers who fail in their economic support obligations are often willing but financially incapable of paying required

child support (see Meyer, 1999) also reflect the importance of attending to Tamis-LeMonda and Cabrera's research recommendations to study fatherhood as a multidimensional phenomenon, to understand the perspectives of fathers themselves, and to attend to the experience of low-income fathers. These studies also show how research on fatherhood sometimes challenges contemporary portrayals of the absent or "dead-beat" dad and offer new approaches to policies to enhance father involvement.

Second, research on fatherhood can also contribute to more thoughtful policy recommendations by highlighting the complexity of family life. Family law is a very blunt instrument for altering family functioning, and often policy reforms intended to address specific problems in family life have unintended detriments. Sometimes one member of a family benefits (e.g., mothers, fathers) while others do not (e.g., children), or sometimes family processes change beneficially but have unexpected consequences. Many of the current research initiatives on fatherhood profiled by Tamis-LeMonda and Cabrera were designed to elucidate these intended and unintended consequences of family policy, especially those concerned with the impact of reforms in welfare, paternity establishment, parental leave, and child support enforcement on father involvement, particularly in disadvantaged families. Understanding how policy reform related to fathers can have diverse consequences for families—both intended and unintended—is an important contribution of developmental researchers to policy debates about fatherhood.

On occasion, research can also consider the *potential* impact of proposed policy reforms. As the authors indicate, for example, much recent legislation has focused on enforcing fathers' economic support obligations to children without seeking to strengthen their visitation relationship. Financial support is the most regulatable form of father involvement, of course, and has the added benefit to policymakers of reducing public assistance to single mothers. But such

policies emphasize the economic support of fatherhood over its relational significance and are vulnerable to charges of unfairness. What would happen, therefore, if visitation was explicitly tied to child support payments? Would fathers maintain greater fidelity to visitation because of their economic commitment to offspring (Seltzer, McLanahan, & Hanson, 1998)? Would they become "born again dads" who are motivated to visit offspring primarily because it reduces their child support obligation (Maccoby, 1999)? What difference would the father's motivation make to children? How would mothers and fathers renegotiate their respective caregiving and economic responsibilities? These are researchable questions, especially in light of recent changes in divorce law in California that link child support payments more directly to the frequency of visitation of the nonresidential parent. Such research would underscore that changes in family policy should be considered in light of their diverse effects on family functioning.

Third, research on fatherhood can contribute to more thoughtful public and policy discourse about the family by emphasizing, as the authors do, fatherhood as a *developmental* phenomenon. This is important because, by contrast with the public tendency to perceive fatherhood exclusively as a *status*, a developmental orientation opens many potential avenues for strengthening fatherhood and father involvement.

As Tamis-LeMonda and Cabrera note, the origins of fatherhood begin in a boy's experience with his own father long before biological paternity occurs. It is shaped by the expectations of fatherhood fostered by the culture and it unfolds in the relationship with the child's mother before either have become parents. Fatherhood is forged in a young man's initial experiences with his offspring and the challenges and supports he experiences during this crucial transition. But there are further transitions in fatherhood. One occurs during the initial year or two after divorce or nonmarital childbearing, when enduring patterns of visi-

tation and economic child support become established (Thompson & Laible, 1999). Another is during the initial years after remarriage, when relationships with stepchildren are carefully and mutually negotiated.

If fatherhood is a developmental phenomenon, then there are many more opportunities to shape contemporary fatherhood than current public policies envision. These include consideration of the conflicting messages that boys and young men receive from society about the meaning and significance of fatherhood, the supports that expectant fathers receive when biological paternity occurs, and the lessons about nonresidential paternity or stepparenting that emerge explicitly (or implicitly) as men enter into divorce, remarriage, or other new family circumstances (Parke & Brott, 1999; Pollack, 1998). Because the law expresses as well as institutionalizes social values, public policies concerning parental leave, divorce, child custody and child support, welfare, and other aspects of family functioning enunciate portrayals of fatherhood with lifelong significance.

Conclusion

Fatherhood is a controversial topic of pub-

lic and policy debate because it matters. Fathers profoundly influence the lives of offspring whether they are involved, nurturant dads or absent, disinterested parents. Moreover, the involvement of fathers in their families has broader implications for the lives of women, the nature of intergenerational relationships, and the demands on public assistance. This is why discourse about contemporary fatherhood inevitably embraces broader public values concerning the family and the needs of children.

Developmental scientists are influenced by the same social values, but their most important contribution to this debate is their resistance to oversimplified portrayals of fathers and the family. Their research teaches them that fathers and families are complex, and thus neither a society-wide rejuvenation of traditional fatherhood nor the relegation of fathers to economic providers alone is a satisfactory response to the dilemmas of contemporary fatherhood. Contributing to informed public discussion of these issues requires, however, that developmental scientists incorporate into their professional responsibility an awareness of and involvement in these policy discussions. As Tamis-LeMonda and Cabrera have shown, the connection between research and policy on father involvement is important to us all.

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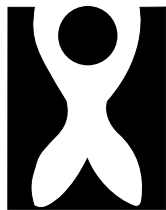
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