



U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Office of Family Assistance



Data Snapshot: Changes in Father Involvement 2002–2016

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Child Trends

This Data Snapshot reports on how resident and non-resident fathers' involvement with their young and school-age children changed from 2002 to 2016.

Data in this snapshot come from the 2002 and 2015–2017 [National Survey of Family Growth \(NSFG\)](#) (see Data box, page 12). Analyses are limited to men aged 20–44 who reported having at least one minor child (ages 0–18). Information on father involvement is shown separately for resident and non-resident fathers, and by child age (0–4 and 5–18), because developmentally appropriate involvement varies by residency and by a child's age.

For each analysis, we present data graphically and point out key findings. We underline each increase or decrease that is a statistically significant change. When we do not indicate significance, there may have been a change, but it is not statistically significant. All changes mentioned in the Highlights section (page 3) are significant.

The figures in the snapshot show fathers' reports of how frequently during the previous four weeks they engaged in various activities with their youngest child. Fathers whose youngest child was 0–4 years old were asked to report on four activities (eating a meal, playing, reading, and bathing; Figures 1-4), and fathers whose youngest child was 5–18 years old were asked about three activities (eating a meal, helping with homework, and travel to activities; Figures 5-7).

Note on non-resident fathers

- In 2002, fathers who had not seen or visited with their child in the last 12 months were not asked about their involvement with their child; therefore, they are not included in the figures. Similarly, in 2016, non-resident fathers who reported they had not seen or visited with their child in the last four weeks were not asked about their involvement with their child and are not included in the figures.

¹ Suggested citation: McClay, A. & Ramos-Olazagasti, M. (2019). *Changes in father involvement 2002–16*. (NRFC Data Snapshot). National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. <https://www.fatherhood.gov/library-resource/data-snapshot-changes-father-involvement-2002-2016>

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Highlights

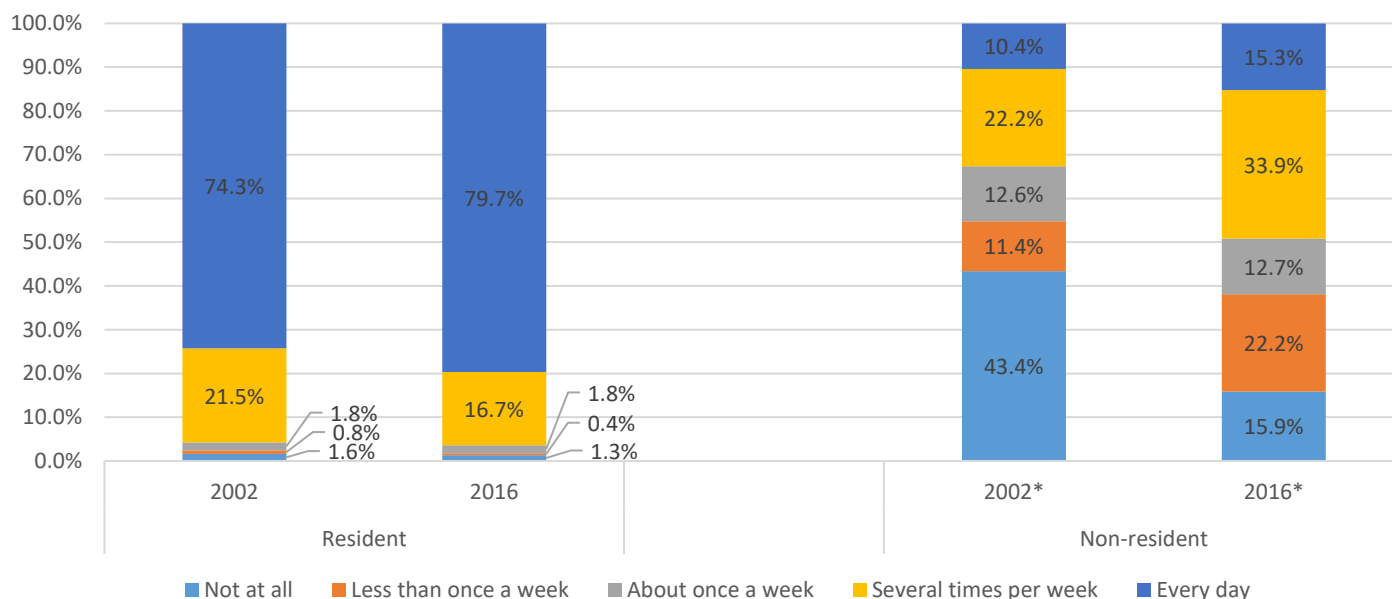
- **Resident fathers' involvement with their children was similar in some areas** in 2002 and 2016; for example:
 - Most resident fathers in 2002 (74 percent) and 2016 (80 percent) reported eating meals every day with their young children (ages 0–4).
 - More than half of resident fathers in 2002 (57 percent) and 2016 (52 percent) reported reading to their young children several times per week or every day.
 - Most resident fathers in 2002 (58 percent) and 2016 (54 percent) reported that they helped their school-age children (ages 5–18) with homework several times per week or every day.
- **Resident fathers' involvement did change in some areas**; for example:
 - The proportion of resident fathers who reported bathing their young children every day decreased from 53 percent in 2002 to 29 percent in 2016. However, the majority of resident fathers bathed their young children at least once a week (77 percent in 2016, compared to 89 percent in 2002).
 - The proportion of resident fathers who reported eating a meal every day with their school-age children decreased from 72 percent in 2002 to 49 percent in 2016. However, nearly all resident fathers reported eating a meal with their school-age children at least several times a week at both time points (95 percent in 2002 and 92 percent in 2016).
- **Non-resident father involvement generally increased**; for example:
 - The proportion of non-resident fathers who reported not eating a meal with their young children at all decreased from 43 percent in 2002 to 16 percent in 2016.
 - The proportion of non-resident fathers who reported not playing with their young children at all decreased from 39 percent in 2002 to 14 percent in 2016.
 - The proportion of non-resident fathers who reported reading to their young children occasionally (less than once a week) increased from 8 percent in 2002 to 22 percent in 2016.
 - The proportion of non-resident fathers who reported bathing their young children occasionally (less than once a week) also increased, from 6 percent in 2002 to 21 percent in 2016.
 - The proportion of non-resident fathers who reported helping their school-age children with homework less than once a week or not at all decreased from 79 percent in 2002 to 66 percent in 2016.
- The proportion of **non-resident fathers providing financial support** for their child was similar in 2002 (85 percent) and 2016 (80 percent).
 - However, the proportion of fathers who reported making financial contributions on a regular basis, and as a result of formal child support orders, was lower in 2016 (82 and 41 percent, respectively) relative to 2002 (90 and 55 percent, respectively).

Father involvement with young children, 2002 and 2016

Eating a meal

Figure 1 shows resident and non-resident fathers' reports of how often they ate a meal with their young children (ages 0–4) in the past four weeks in 2002 and 2016. Responses ranged from not at all to every day.

Figure 1. Fathers' reports of eating a meal with child aged 0–4 in past four weeks, by resident status: 2002 and 2016



Source: Child Trends analyses of NSFG Cycle 6 (2002) and 2015–2017 NSFG data.

Note: Resident N = 722 (2002), N = 646 (2016); Non-resident N = 133 (2002), N = 106 (2016). Includes fathers aged 20–44 who reported having a child aged 18 years or younger. Fathers include residential and non-residential, biological and/or adoptive fathers. Data are weighted. Due to rounding, column values may not add up to 100 percent. In 2002 fathers were asked how frequently they ate “a meal” with their child; in 2016 they were asked how frequently they ate “an evening meal” with their child. There were no statistically significant differences between 2002 and 2016 in resident fathers' reports of how frequently they ate a meal with their young child.

*There were statistically significant differences between 2002 and 2016 in non-resident fathers' reports of how frequently they ate a meal with their young child ($p < 0.05$).

Resident fathers

- Most resident fathers reported eating a meal with their young children every day or several times a week.
 - Although not statistically significant, the proportion who reported eating a meal with their young children on a **daily** basis increased, from 74 percent in 2002 to 80 percent in 2016, while the proportion who reported doing so **several times a week** decreased, from 22 to 17 percent.

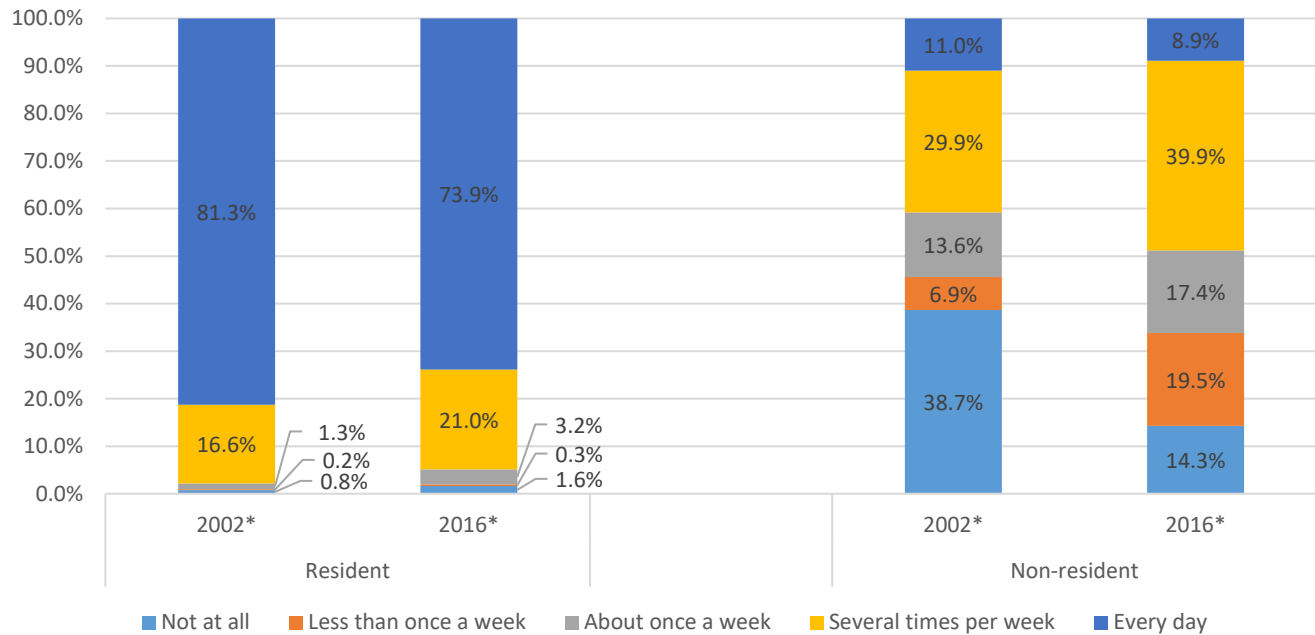
Non-resident fathers

- Non-resident fathers reported eating a meal with their young children more frequently in 2016 than non-resident fathers had reported in 2002.
 - Although not statistically significant, the proportion who reported eating a meal with their young children **several times per week** increased, from 22 to 34 percent.
 - The proportion who reported they **had not eaten a meal** with their young children at all over the last four weeks decreased significantly, from 43 to only 16 percent.

Playing

Figure 2 shows resident and non-resident fathers' reports of how often they played with their young children (ages 0–4) in the past four weeks in 2002 and 2016. Responses ranged from not at all to every day.

Figure 2. Fathers' reports of playing with child aged 0–4 in past four weeks, by resident status: 2002 and 2016



Source: Child Trends analyses of NSFG Cycle 6 (2002) and 2015–2017 NSFG data.

Note: Resident N = 722 (2002), N = 646 (2016); Non-resident N = 133 (2002), N = 106 (2016). Includes fathers aged 20–44 who reported having a child aged 18 years or younger. Fathers include residential and non-residential, biological and/or adoptive fathers. Data are weighted. Due to rounding, column values may not add up to 100 percent.

* Differences between 2002 and 2016 were significant ($p < 0.05$).

Resident fathers

- In 2016, resident fathers reported playing less frequently with their young children than resident fathers reported in 2002.
 - Although not statistically significant, the proportion of resident fathers who reported playing with their young children **every day** decreased, from 81 to 74 percent, but the proportion reporting they played with their young children **several times a week** increased, from 17 to 21 percent.
 - The proportion of resident fathers who reported playing with their child **about once a week** increased significantly, from 1 to 3 percent.

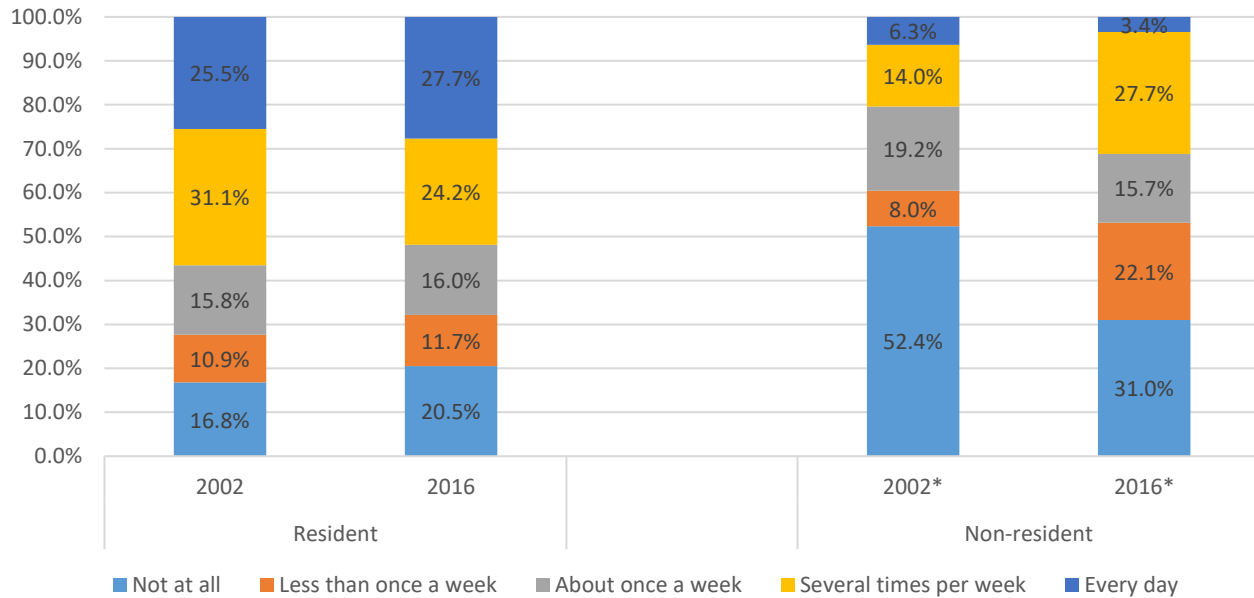
Non-resident fathers

- Non-resident fathers reported playing more frequently with their young children in 2016 than in 2002.
 - Although not statistically significant, the proportion of non-resident fathers who reported playing with their child **several times per week** increased, from 30 to 40 percent, while the proportion who reported playing with their child **every day** decreased, from 11 to 9 percent.
 - The proportion who reported **not playing** with their child at all decreased significantly, from 39 to 14 percent.

Reading

Figure 3 shows resident and non-resident fathers' reports of how often they read to their young children (ages 0–4) in the past four weeks in 2002 and 2016. Responses ranged from not at all to every day.

Figure 3. Fathers' reports of reading to their child aged 0–4 in past four weeks, by resident status: 2002 and 2016



Source: Child Trends analyses of NSFG Cycle 6 (2002) and 2015–2017 NSFG data.

Note: Resident N = 722 (2002), N = 645 (2016); Non-resident N = 134 (2002), N = 106 (2016). Includes fathers aged 20–44 who reported having a child aged 18 years or younger. Fathers include residential and non-residential, biological and/or adoptive fathers. Data are weighted. Due to rounding, column values may not add up to 100 percent. There were no significant differences between 2002 and 2016 in resident fathers' reports of how frequently they read to their young child.

* There were statistically significant differences between 2002 and 2016 in non-resident fathers' reports of how frequently they read to their young child ($p < 0.05$).

Resident fathers

- Resident fathers' reports of how often they read to their young children did not change much between 2002 and 2016.
 - In both 2002 and 2016, about one in four resident fathers reported reading to their child **daily** (26 and 28 percent respectively).
 - From 2002 to 2016, there was a non-statistically significant decrease in the proportion who reported reading to their children **several times a week**, from 31 to 24 percent.

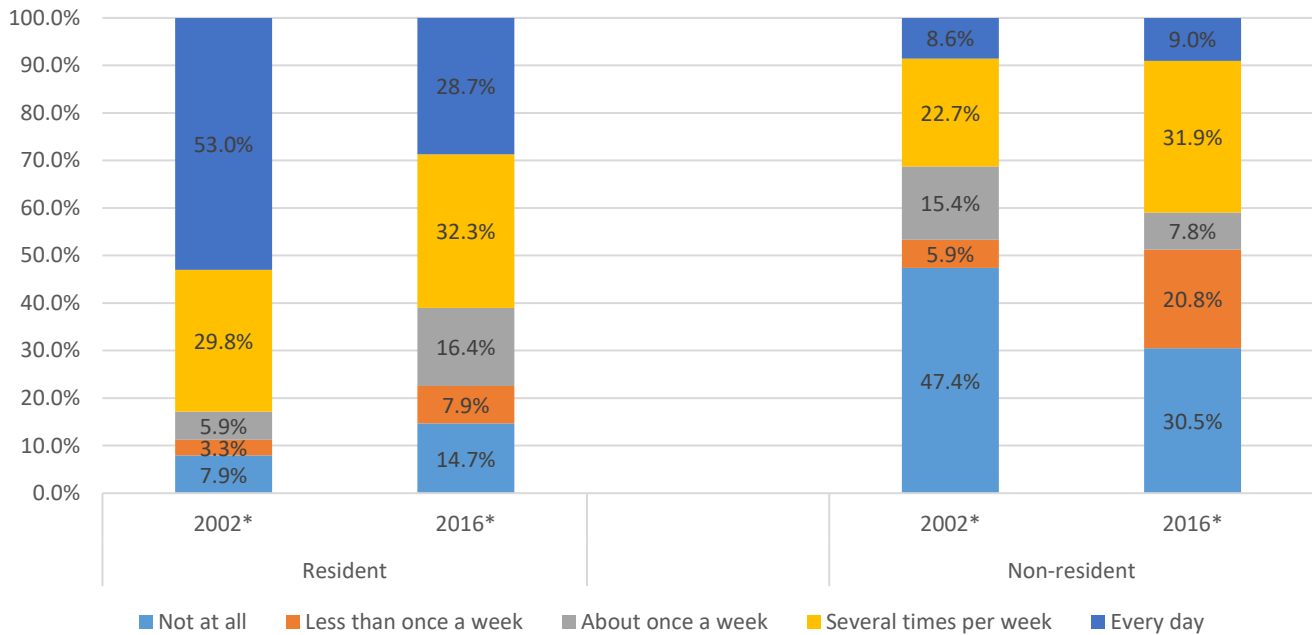
Non-resident fathers

- In 2016, non-resident fathers reported reading to their young children more frequently compared to 2002.
 - From 2002 to 2016, there was a non-statistically significant increase in the proportion of non-resident fathers who reported reading to their young children either **every day** or **several times a week**, from 20 to 31 percent.
 - The proportion of non-resident fathers reporting they **never read** to their children decreased, whereas the proportion reporting they read **less than once a week** increased:
 - In 2002, more than half (52 percent) reported **never reading** to their child, compared to fewer than a third (31 percent) in 2016.
 - In 2016, one in five (22 percent) reported reading to their child **less than once a week**, compared to 8 percent in 2002, a significant increase.

Bathing

Figure 4 shows resident and non-resident fathers' reports of how often they bathed their young children (ages 0–4) in the past four weeks in 2002 and 2016. Responses ranged from not at all to every day.

Figure 4. Fathers' reports of bathing child aged 0–4 in past four weeks, by resident status: 2002 and 2016



Source: Child Trends analyses of NSFG Cycle 6 (2002) and 2015–2017 NSFG data.

Note: Resident N = 722 (2002), N = 646 (2016); Non-resident N = 133 (2002), N = 106 (2016). Includes fathers aged 20–44 who reported having a child aged 18 years or younger. Fathers include residential and non-residential, biological and/or adoptive fathers. Data are weighted. Due to rounding, column values may not add up to 100 percent.

* Differences between 2002 and 2016 in fathers' reports of how frequently they bathed their young child were significant ($p < 0.05$).

Resident fathers

- In 2016, resident fathers reported that they bathed their young children less frequently than in 2002.
 - The proportion who reported bathing their young children **every day** decreased significantly, from 53 to 29 percent.
 - Although not statistically significant, the proportion reporting they bathed their young children **several times a week** increased, from 30 to 32 percent. The proportion reporting they did so **about once a week** increased significantly, from 6 to 16 percent.
 - The proportion who reported bathing their young children **less than once a week** or **not at all** increased significantly from 11 to 23 percent.

Non-resident fathers

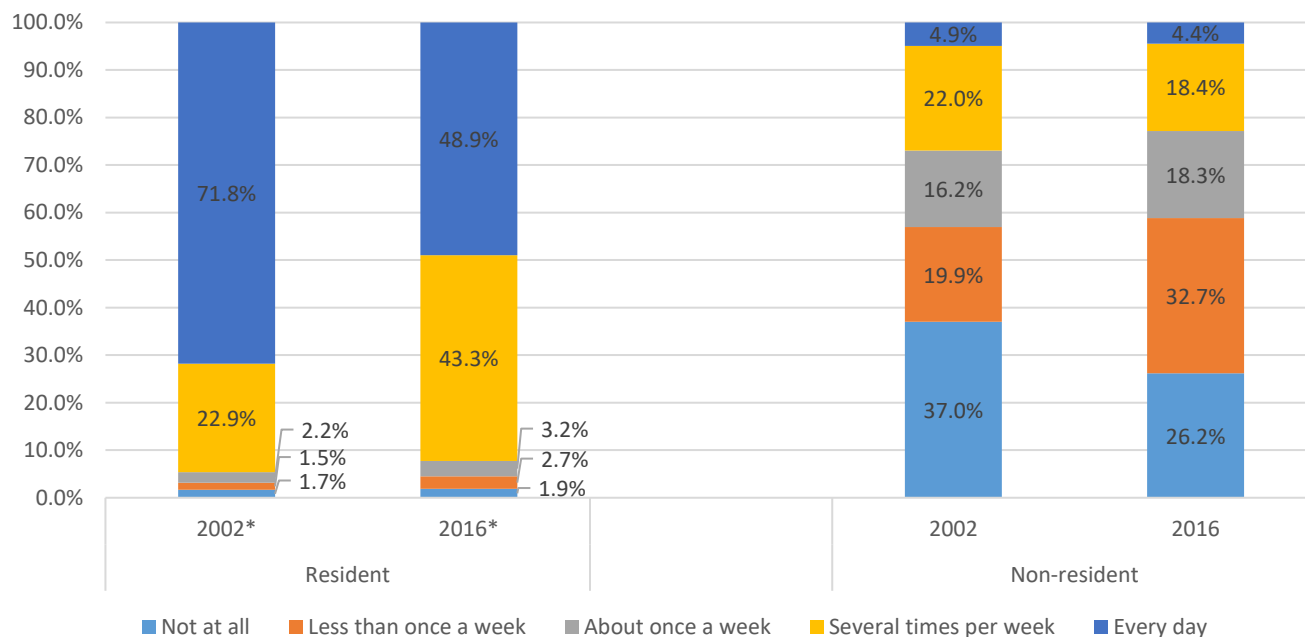
- In 2016, non-resident fathers reported that they bathed their young children more frequently than in 2002.
 - Although not statistically significant, there was an increase in the proportion who reported bathing their child either **every day** or **several times a week**, from 31 to 41 percent.
 - The proportion who reported bathing their child **less than once a week** increased significantly, from 6 to 21 percent, while the proportion who reported never bathing their child decreased from 47 to 31 percent.

Father involvement with school-age children, 2002 and 2016

Eating a meal

Figure 5 shows resident and non-resident fathers' reports of how often they ate a meal with their school-age children (ages 5–18) in the past four weeks in 2002 and 2016. Responses ranged from not at all to every day.

Figure 5. Fathers' reports of eating a meal with child aged 5–18 in past four weeks, by resident status: 2002 and 2016



Source: Child Trends analyses of NSFG Cycle 6 (2002) and 2015–2017 NSFG data.

Note: Resident N = 888 (2002), N = 460 (2016); Non-resident N = 374 (2002), N = 168 (2016). Includes fathers aged 20–44 who reported having a child aged 18 years or younger. Fathers include residential and non-residential, biological and/or adoptive fathers. Data are weighted. Due to rounding, column values may not add up to 100 percent. In 2002 fathers were asked how frequently they ate “a meal” with their child, and in 2016 they were asked how frequently they ate “an evening meal” with their child. There were no significant differences between 2002 and 2016 in non-resident fathers' reports of how frequently they ate a meal with their school-age child.

* There were statistically significant differences between 2002 and 2016 in resident fathers' reports of how frequently they ate a meal with their school-age child ($p < 0.05$).

Resident fathers

- Most resident fathers reported eating meals with their school-age children every day or several times a week.
 - However, the proportion who reported eating a meal with their children **every day** decreased significantly, from 72 percent in 2002 to 49 percent in 2016. This was offset by the proportion who reported eating a meal with their children **several times per week**, which increased from 23 to 43 percent.

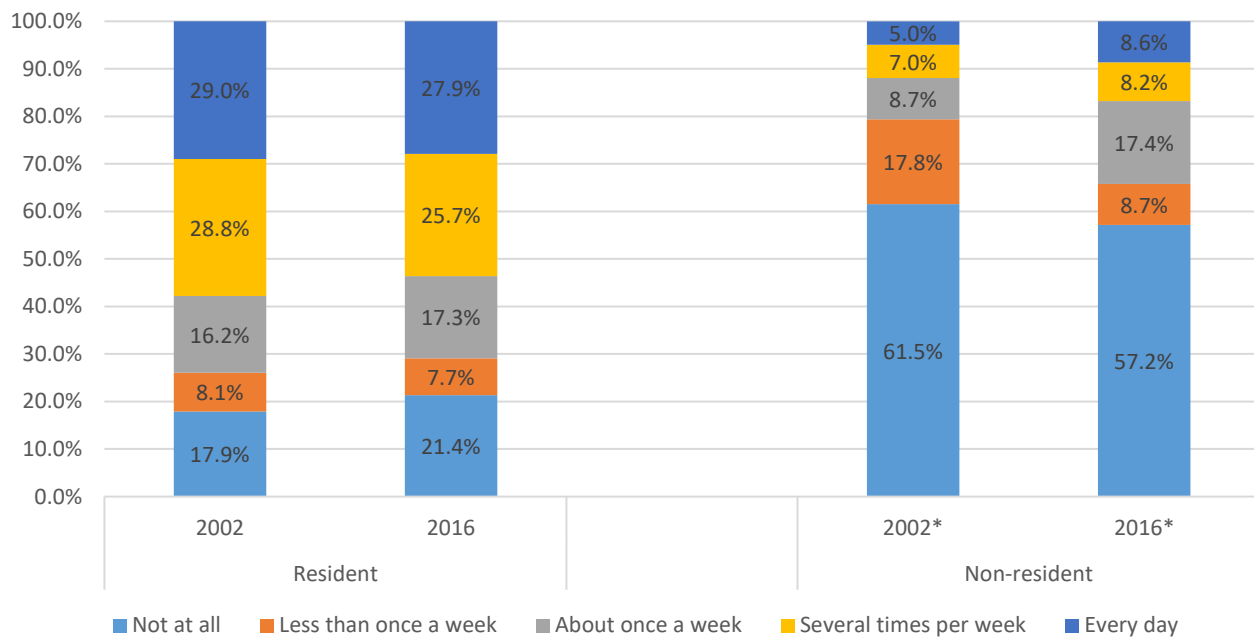
Non-resident fathers

- Between 2002 and 2016, non-resident fathers' reports of how often they eat a meal with their school-age children did not change much.
 - In 2002 and 2016, about 5 percent reported eating a meal with their child **every day**, and about 20 percent reported doing so **several times per week**.
 - Although not statistically significant, from 2002 to 2016, the proportion reporting **not eating a meal** with their child decreased from 37 to 26 percent, while the proportion reporting they did so **less than once a week** increased from 20 to 33 percent.

Helping with homework

Figure 6 shows resident and non-resident fathers' reports of how often they helped their school-age children (ages 5–18) with their homework in the past four weeks in 2002 and 2016. Responses ranged from not at all to every day.

Figure 6. Fathers' reports of helping child aged 5–18 with homework in past four weeks, by resident status: 2002 and 2016



Source: Child Trends analyses of NSFG Cycle 6 (2002) and 2015–2017 NSFG data.

Note: Resident N = 887 (2002), N = 460 (2016); Non-resident N = 374 (2002), N = 168 (2016). Includes fathers aged 20–44 who reported having a child aged 18 years or younger. Fathers include residential and non-residential, biological and/or adoptive fathers. Data are weighted. Due to rounding, column values may not add up to 100 percent. There were no significant differences between 2002 and 2016 in resident fathers' reports of how frequently they help their child with homework.

* There were statistically significant differences between 2002 and 2016 in non-resident fathers' reports of how frequently they helped their child with homework ($p < 0.05$).

Resident fathers

- Resident fathers' reports of how often they helped their school-age children with homework did not change much between 2002 and 2016.
 - In 2002, 58 percent reported helping their child with homework **every day** or **several times per week**, while 54 percent reported doing the same in 2016.

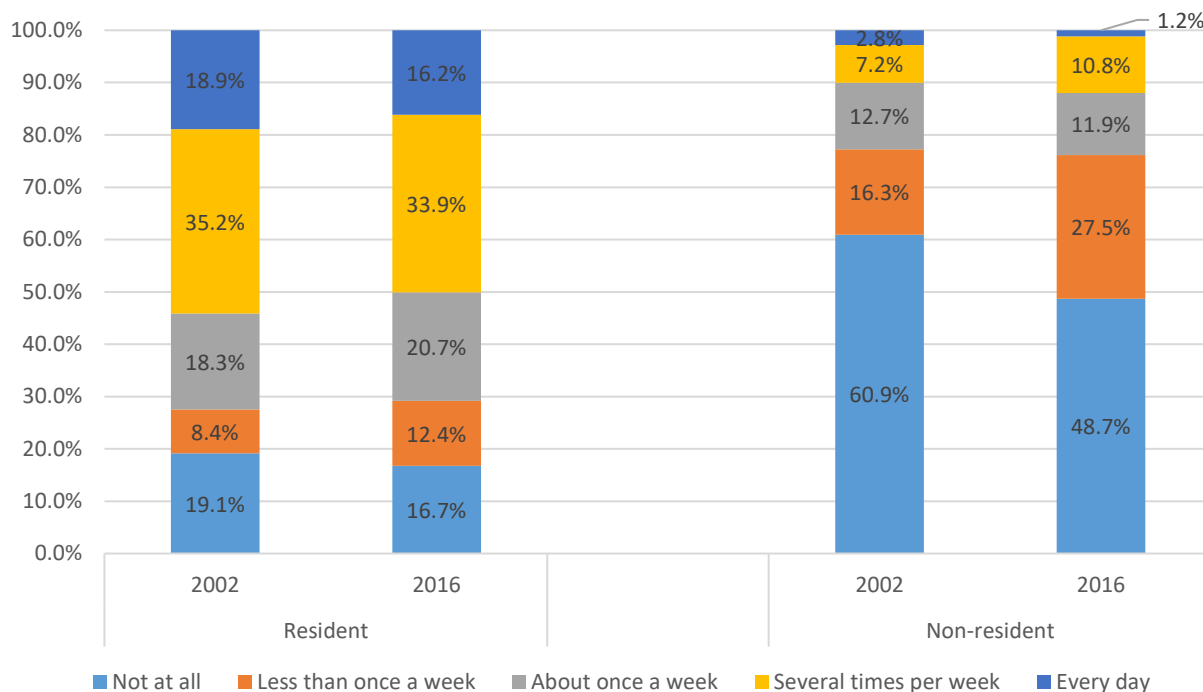
Non-resident fathers

- An increased proportion of non-resident fathers reported helping their school-age children with homework.
 - The proportion who reported helping their children with homework **every day** or **several times a week** increased, from 12 percent in 2002 to 17 percent in 2016, and the proportion indicating they helped **about once a week** increased from 9 to 17 percent.
 - The proportion of non-resident fathers who reported helping their school-age children with homework **less than once a week** or **not at all** decreased significantly from 79 to 66 percent.

Travel to activities

Figure 7 shows resident and non-resident fathers' reports of how often they took their school-age children (ages 5–18) to or from activities in the past four weeks in 2002 and 2016. Responses ranged from not at all to every day.

Figure 7. Fathers' reports of taking their child aged 5–18 to or from activities in past four weeks, by resident status: 2002 and 2016



Source: Child Trends analyses of NSFG Cycle 6 (2002) and 2015–2017 NSFG data.

Note: Resident N = 888 (2002), N = 460 (2016); Non-resident N = 374 (2002), N = 168 (2016). Includes fathers aged 20–44 who reported having a child aged 18 years or younger. Fathers include residential and non-residential, biological and/or adoptive fathers. Data are weighted. Due to rounding, column values may not add up to 100 percent. There were no significant differences between 2002 and 2016 in resident fathers' or non-resident fathers' reports of how frequently they took their child to or from activities.

Resident fathers

- In 2002 and 2016, resident fathers' reports of how frequently they took their school-age children to or from activities were similar.
 - In 2002, 54 percent of resident fathers reported taking their child to or from activities **every day** or **several times per week**, and 19 percent reported they did **not take** their children to or from any activities in the past four weeks, whereas 50 and 17 percent, respectively, reported doing the same in 2016.

Non-resident fathers

- Non-resident fathers' reports of how often they took their school-age children to or from activities did not change much between 2002 and 2016, with the exception of those who reported never doing so.
 - Although not statistically significant, there were slight increases in the proportion reporting that they took their child to or from activities **every day** or **several times per week** (from 10 to 12 percent), and in the proportion reporting that they did so **about once a week** (from 12 to 13 percent).
 - There was a non-statistically significant decrease in the proportion reporting that they **never** took their children to or from activities, from 61 to 49 percent.

Financial contributions of non-resident fathers for their minor children, 2002 and 2016

Table 1 shows fathers' reports of financial contributions for their youngest non-resident child in the past year, as well as whether that contribution was made regularly (as opposed to once in a while) and whether it was part of a formal child support order. These analyses only include non-resident fathers, defined as fathers who had a child they did not live with.

Table 1. Percentage of non-resident fathers making financial contributions for their youngest non-resident child (ages 0–18), by frequency and child support order status: 2002 and 2016

	2002	2016
Contributed financial support (informal contributions or formal child support payments)		
Yes	84.6%	80.1%
No	15.4%	19.9%
If contributed financial support, did so on a regular basis*		
Yes	89.8%	82.2%
No	10.2%	17.8%
If contributed financial support, did so as a result of a child support order†		
Yes	55.4%	40.7%
No	44.6%	59.3%

Source: Child Trends analyses of NSFG Cycle 6 (2002) and 2015–2017 NSFG data.

Note: Child support N = 609 (2002), N = 428 (2016); contributed on a regular basis N = 535 (2002), N = 354 (2016); money contributed as part of child support order N = 534 (2002), N = 354 (2016). Fathers include non-residential, biological fathers aged 20–44 who reported having a non-residential child aged 18 years or younger. Financial contributions questions are asked about fathers' youngest non-residential child. Data are weighted. There were no significant differences between 2002 and 2016 in the proportion of non-resident fathers who contributed informally or formally through child support in the last 12 months ($p < 0.05$).

* There were statistically significant differences between 2002 and 2016 in the proportion of non-resident fathers who contributed financially on a regular basis in the last 12 months ($p < 0.05$).

† There were statistically significant differences between 2002 and 2016 in the proportion of non-resident fathers who contributed financially as part of a child support order in the last 12 months ($p < 0.05$).

Contributed financial support

- The proportion of fathers who reported providing some financial support (informal contributions or formal child support payments) for their youngest non-residential child in the last 12 months was similar in 2002 and 2016.
 - Eighty-five percent of fathers reported providing financial support in 2002, and 80 percent did so in 2016.

Contributed financial support on a regular basis

- The proportion of fathers who reported providing financial support on a regular basis for their youngest non-residential child in the last 12 months was significantly lower in 2016 than in 2002.
 - Eighty-two percent of fathers reported providing financial support on a **regular basis** in 2016, compared to 90 percent in 2002.

Contributed financial support as part of a child support order

- The proportion of fathers who reported providing financial support for their youngest non-residential child in the last 12 months through a formal child support order was significantly lower in 2016 than in 2002.
 - Forty-one percent of fathers reported that at least part of their financial contribution was paid as a result of a **formal child support order** in 2016, compared to 55 percent in 2002.

This Data Snapshot was developed by Alison McClay and Maria Ramos-Olazagasti at Child Trends on behalf of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse under contract to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance.

Suggested citation:

McClay, A. & Ramos-Olazagasti, M. (2019). *Changes in Father Involvement 2002–16*. (NRFC Data Snapshot). National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. <https://www.fatherhood.gov/library-resource/data-snapshot-changes-father-involvement-2002-2016>

Data box

This National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (NRFC) Data Snapshot draws from the authors' analyses of [2002 National Survey of Family Growth \(NSFG\)](#) and [2015–2017 NSFG](#) data.

The 2002 NSFG survey collected data on family life from a nationally representative sample of men and women aged 15–44 and the 2015–2017 survey drew on a sample of men and women aged 15–49. When weighted, the 2002 data is representative of individuals aged 15–44 in 2002, and the 2015–2017 wave of the NSFG is representative of individuals aged 15–49 in 2016. The total number of men sampled in 2002 was 4,928, and the total for the 2015–2017 NSFG was 4,540. To identify fathers for this NRFC Data Snapshot, the authors selected males aged 20–44 who reported having at least one minor child (ages 18 or younger). Respondents between the ages of 15 and 19 were excluded from the analyses, because only five men in this age range had a minor child in the 2015–2017 wave. Men aged 45–49 were also excluded, because individuals in this age range were not included in the 2002 sample of the NSFG. Fathers with residential children, non-residential children, and both residential and non-residential children are all included in the analyses (N = 1,706 in 2002; N = 1,388 in 2016). We compared fathers' involvement with their coresident and non-coresident children in 2002 and 2016. The sections of the NSFG on activities with children were revised for the 2015–2017 survey; in 2015–2017, fathers answered questions about a specific focal child among their coresident and non-coresident children, instead of responding for all children as they were asked to do in 2002. The eating a meal variable changed from “eat meals” in 2002 to “eat evening meals together” in 2015–17; we kept this variable in our analysis because the distributions were comparable between survey years, and eating a meal is an important measure of father involvement. Fathers who reported they had not seen their child in the last 12 months in 2002, and the last four weeks in 2016, were not asked about their involvement with their young child (N = 0 in 2002; N = 41 in 2016) or school-age child (N = 10 in 2002; N = 111 in 2016). We tested (via chi-square tests [$p < 0.05$]) whether distributions in 2002 and 2016 were significantly different. Analyses were conducted using the Stata statistical software and included sampling weights.

Data sources:

National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS). (2004). National Survey of Family Growth, Cycle 6 (2002). CDC National Center for Health Statistics. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/nsfg_cycle6.htm.

NCHS. (2018). 2015–2017 National Survey of Family Growth, Public-Use Data and Documentation. CDC National Center for Health Statistics. https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg/nsfg_2015_2017_puf.htm.