In 2002, 69% of children under 18 lived with two parents, 23% lived only with their mother, and 5% lived only with their father. Thus, in single parent households, children have been more than four times as likely to live with their mother than to live with their father (Fields, 2003). About one-third of custodial mothers have never been married, while 17.2% of custodial fathers have never been married (Grail, 2002). In spite of ample evidence that fathers are important to children's development and well-being (see, for example, Sylvester & Reich, 2002), studies have shown that, over time, non-custodial fathers tend to become less involved in the lives of their children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Argys, Peters, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998). This is more likely to occur when the parents have not been married (Seltzer, 1991).

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 included provisions to promote and strengthen two-parent families and to encourage father involvement, primarily through increased collection of child support (Katz, 1996). Policies to encourage contact between non-custodial fathers and their children have been proposed in legislation to foster responsible fatherhood (S. 653, 2001). These policy trends increase the urgency to comprehend the dynamics of parents' decisions regarding contact with their children after separation. This understanding is important for a number of reasons including (1) the effect of parents' decisions on children's well-being, (2) enhanced self-esteem for fathers when they are actively involved with their children, and (3) the advantages for mothers when there is a second parent to help with child-raising. The goal of this article is to present concerns that custodial mothers have about non-custodial father-child contact that may affect their decisions regarding visitation, to clarify the relationship between visitation and paying child support, and to make recommendations for policy that could enhance father-child relationships. Focus was limited to mothers who were not married to the father at the time of the child's birth since they must face somewhat different issues than mothers in divorce situations. For example, paternity will not be acknowledged until it is established legally. Also, not being married means that the couple may or may not have been in a committed relationship at the time of the pregnancy. This study has sought to answer (1) how mothers feel about visitation, (2) determinants that are important in mothers' decisions about visits, and (3) the influence of the child's feelings on her decisions. One determinant thought to be a possible indicator of the mother's decisions was the connection between child support and her degree of willingness to allow visits between her child and his/her father, in that the father could demand visits if he was ordered to pay child support.

Quantitative data cannot adequately capture all of the factors that may go into mothers' decisions due to their complexity. A qualitative study can provide in-depth information to illuminate attitudes of mothers toward father-child relationships and present a contextual picture of the role of mothers in decisions regarding visitation.

LITERATURE REVIEW
The literature reveals that determinants that may be important are the attitudes of the mothers toward visitation, child support, and quality of the relationship between the parents. The following review provides pertinent literature on these factors.

MOTHERS' ATTITUDES

Studies have shown that many mothers, both inside and outside of marriage, are ambivalent about fathers' active involvement with their children and often serve as the gatekeepers of these interactions (DeLuccie, 1995; Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998; Kruk, 1991). DeLuccie (1995), evaluating intact families, found the strongest predictors of frequency of father involvement were age of child, maternal attitudes about importance of father involvement, and mothers' satisfaction with paternal involvement. DeLuccie recommended looking at the history of mothers' relationships with their own fathers to understand their decisions about father involvement.

When the parents are no longer together, the role of the custodial parent is particularly crucial in determining the amount of contact children have with their non-custodial parent. A fathers' rights advocacy group estimates that the custodial parent interferes with visitation in 37% of divorce cases (National Council for Children's Rights as cited in Pearson & Thoennes, 2000). Kruk's (1991) study of divorced non-custodial fathers found that paternal contact was strongly related to the mothers' encouragement/discouragement of fathers' contact. Of the 40 disengaged fathers, who were not seeing their children regularly, all of the women had actively discouraged contact. Doherty et al. (1998) explained fathering as a multilateral relationship with a range of influences, including mothers' expectations and behaviors, quality of the coparental relationship, economic factors, institutional practices, and employment opportunities. Doherty et al. noted that positive support from mothers can help men become more responsible parents, but fathers whose context is less supportive, who do not live with their children or who have a strained relationship with the mother, will need more efforts to develop good father-child relationships. Yet, some studies have shown that even though the parents are separated, mothers may offer support for visits, seeing the value of the father-child relationship (Edin, 1995; Furstenberg, Sherwood, & Sullivan, 1992; Kurz, 1995; McLanahan & Carlson, 2002).

Mothers may encourage father-child interaction, regardless of economic support. Waller (as cited in Garfinkel, McLanahan, & Hanson, 1998) concluded that impoverished mothers and fathers emphasize emotional support and guidance more than economic responsibility and that unwed fathers place value on biological parenthood. Waller, as well as others (see, for example, Edin, 1995; Furstenberg et al., 1992), found that most mothers would like fathers to be more involved with their children, even if they are not reliable in providing financial support. In her sample of 129 divorced women, Kurz (1995) found that 42% of mothers wanted more visitation and 29% wanted less. She also found that the women who were happy with the parenting plan reported that visits with the children went well. For those women who want less visitation, conflicts with their ex-husbands were given as one reason as well as conflicts between father and child. The mothers expressed sadness and regret when there was no father-child relationship.
McLanahan and Carlson (2002) reported, in their findings from the Fragile Families Study, that 93% of the mothers in non-marital relationships wanted the father to be involved; two-thirds wanted the father involved in raising their child even when not romantically involved with the father at the time of birth. This study also found that most fathers were involved during the pregnancy and at the time of the birth. Nearly all (99%) of the fathers expressed the desire to be involved in raising their children. Thus, in many cases, both parents would like the father-child relationship to continue.

VISITATION AND CHILD SUPPORT

Economic contributions have often been seen as a key factor in explaining both mothers' and fathers' behaviors and the frequency of visits with their children. As stated by Lin and McLanahan (2001), fathers are likely to demand more time with their child in exchange for financial remunerations. Teitler (2001) noted that academic and public interest in contributions of fathers has, until recently, been limited to their role as breadwinners. As a result, there has been an increase in child support payments and concomitantly a larger number of parenting plans established. A large majority of the 6.8 million custodial parents (84.8%) due child support payments in 1999 had arrangements for joint custody or visitation privileges with the non-custodial parents (Grail, 2002). No data could be found on how many fathers are actually seeing their children as a result of being granted visitation privileges. Some studies suggest that fathers who pay child support will be more likely to visit, whereas others suggest that more visits lead to greater compliance in paying child support (Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983; Seltzer, Schaeffer, & Charng, 1989; Teachman, 1991). Seltzer, McLanahan, and Hanson (1998) found that child support payments increase non-custodial fathers' influence on their children and could increase their frequency of contact. Other studies have not found a relationship between visitation and contributions (Arditti, 1992; Arditti & Keith, 1993; Veum, 1993). What is not clearly understood is how mothers view financial contributions as part of their decision-making around visitation.

QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIP

Quality of me relationship between parents after separation has been linked both to increased child support payments and increased visitation. In their study of 58 divorced parents, Wright and Price (1986) found support for their hypothesis that a greater degree of attachment and a good relationship between former spouses were predictive of higher rates of fathers' compliance with child support orders. Teachman (1991) looked at other types of contributions made by fathers in addition to child support. The costs and rewards of providing contributions were assumed to be a function of the degree of emotional and instrumental interdependency between father and child and the quality of the relationship between parents. Furstenberg, Sherwood, and Sullivan (1992) found the quality of the relationship to be a prominent factor in both mothers' and fathers' actions. Fathers' obligations to support their children were "indirectly mediated by emotional ties to the child's mother" (p. 48). Once the emotional ties between the couple were gone, both the
mothers and fathers expected the father to have less interest and involvement in childcare responsibilities. Arditti and Keith (1993) found that, the better the father's relationship with the mother, the higher the quality of his visits. These studies show that the relationship between parents can be a significant factor in father-child relationships.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Mothers’ decisions about visitation are informed by exchange theory. Exchange theory incorporates the perspective that, within the limitations of the information they possess, humans will make choices that will bring the most profit (Nye, 1979). Zimmerman (1988) notes that the assumptions underlying this framework can apply not only within and between families, but also to the relationship between families and policy. As articulated by Homans (1961), exchange theory combines psychological needs and economic needs to explain human behavior. Exchange theory has been used in previous studies as a framework for examining the association between visiting one's children and paying child support (Seltzer, Schaeffer, & Charng, 1989; Teachman. 1991).

Families make choices based on "an assessment of the rewards and costs of various alternatives, choosing the one that seems to offer the greatest rewards for the least cost" (Zimmerman, 1988, p. 87). Mothers making decisions about their child having contact with the non-custodial father will evaluate the rewards of visits, including the benefits that children get from spending time with their fathers and the greater possibility of receiving financial assistance. The costs that mothers evaluate include lifestyle differences and fathers' behaviors that can create conflict between parents and cause confusion for children.

Reciprocity and profitability are two additional concepts of exchange theory applicable when explaining mothers' decisions about visitation. Nye (1979) has argued that reciprocity, helping those who have helped you, takes precedence over profitability, wherein one assesses the most gainful outcome in the relationship of rewards to costs. Utilizing the principle of reciprocity over profitability, mothers may encourage father-child contact even when they do not receive child support because they see the benefit for their children even if there is no financial profit. Exchange theory principles led to the use of a semi-structured interview in the design of this study. This method of data collection assured gathering of information concerning connections between mothers' decisions and what they see as the benefits versus the costs of those decisions.

METHODOLOGY

SAMPLING

Forty-three mothers were identified and interviewed through purposive and snowball sampling. Four sites, all located in Central Texas, were used to identify potential subjects. They included a Communities in Schools program that serves students and their families in over 31 campuses in six school districts, two day care centers, and a community college. These sites yielded 26 mothers willing to participate in interviews. All
participants were asked if they knew other who fit the criteria of this study, who parented a child while not married to the father. This method of snowball sampling produced an additional 17 participants. Each mother was given $10 as reimbursement for time and willingness to participate.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Data were collected through semi-structured audiotaped, face-to-face interviews lasting between one and two hours. Open-ended questions and probes provided data that placed in context the mothers' efforts to balance conflicting stressors in their decisions regarding visitation. Questions were asked about the participant's decision to encourage or discourage contact including the following: how often the father has visited, how the mother feels about visitation by the father, what factors are important in her decision, and how the child feels about the visits. Mothers were also asked to describe their relationship with the father. Questions included how they met, how involved the father was during the pregnancy, and what the relationship has been like since the child was born.

Multiple coding occurred in three stages. Descriptive coding organized the data to create a codebook using Excel to expedite sorting of descriptive variables. Next pattern codes were developed around four interrelated summarizers: themes, causes/explanations, relationships among people, and theoretical constructs (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A final analysis looked at interrelationships between variables and connections between themes. As recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) particularly when there is only one researcher, check-coding the same transcripts verified the original coding and provided a review of the data for discrepancies, overstatements, or errors.

Focus groups were then conducted at two of the research sites with participants and other mothers who fit the criteria, to verify interpretation of the themes. One focus group included six teenage mothers at a Communities in Schools site, including one mother who had been interviewed. The second focus group was held at one of the daycare centers, with three mothers who had participated in the study and 10 other mothers who were in similar situations. Results of the preliminary analysis were shared with each focus group. Participants were asked to comment on how closely the themes matched their own experiences. Participants who had been interviewed were asked how well the themes represented their stories. In both focus groups, members stated that the themes were an accurate reflection of their experiences.

THE PARTICIPANTS

As shown in Table 1, the 43 mothers in this study include a wide age range and diverse educational and ethnic backgrounds. The majority of the mothers, 29, have never been married. Six mothers eventually married the father but all had divorced at the time of the interview. Three mothers have children with two different fathers in a nonmarital relationship, resulting in 46 fathers involved. All but four of the mothers have incomes of less than $20,000. Nineteen have been on Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) at some time while 24 have never used TANF.
RESULTS

According to the participants, of the 46 fathers involved, 20 of them paid child support. Twenty-two of the fathers visited their children on a regular basis, defined at least once a month. Consistent with the literature, 75% of those fathers paying child support saw their child regularly, suggesting reciprocity. Most mothers reported, however, that factors other than receipt of child support influence their decisions regarding visitation. The connection between quality of relationship and decision to allow visits was less clear. Three themes became prominent as explanations for mothers' decisions regarding visitation: (1) concern about fathers' behaviors, (2) the child's desire to see the father, and (3) the mothers' relationship with their own fathers if they come from single parent families. These themes will be illustrated with stories of participants to provide a contextual perspective of mothers' attitudes and decisions. All names have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the families.

QUALITY OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PARENTS

Based on the length of relationship, the presence of abuse, and the mother's perception of the relationship with the biological father, nine relationships were categorized as good, 32 as poor, and one as neutral. One mother, who had children by two different fathers, had a good relationship with one father and a poor relationship with the other. When the relationship was good, all of the fathers saw their children regularly and the mothers were pleased about the visits, making it easier for fathers to visit.

When the relationship was poor, the outcome was less clear. In the 10 cases where fathers had never seen the child or had seen the child very irregularly, the relationships were poor. The mothers felt sad, or at least ambivalent, about the fact that there was no father-child relationship. Of the 32 poor relationships, only five of the mothers were glad that there was no contact with the father and only three mothers had made the decision to stop the visits. The quality of the relationship did not generally affect visitation decisions since the mothers interviewed felt that they should not use the father-child relationship as a weapon. Other factors were more significant in their decision-making.

CONCERNS ABOUT FATHERS' BEHAVIORS

Mothers said they believed that father-child relationships were important but they had concerns about the father's behavior. Responses of participants were included in fathers' behaviors related to (1) differences in lifestyle; (2) behaviors that could bring harm to the child, and (3) inconsistent promises to the child.

Lifestyle issues. In determining if the rewards of a father-child relationship were sufficient to allow visits even when there are costs, mothers struggled when there were lifestyle differences. Mothers described lifestyle disparity ranging from smoking (especially with an asthmatic child) to having guns in the house, use of seat belts, and dating behavior. The following two narratives, taken from the data, provide examples of lifestyle dilemmas.
Dorothy is a 41-year-old Native-American mother with a four-year-old child. Dorothy's relationship with the father was classified as neutral; they had known each other for many years but never dated prior to the pregnancy since he was married. They did not see each other during the pregnancy. Dorothy receives child support regularly and believes that father-child relationships are important. Dorothy took her son to see his father several times during the first four years after he was born, even though the father lived in another state and made no effort to visit. Suddenly, beginning on the child's fourth birthday, the father began regular visits made possible by his move to a nearby city. This unexpected contact has put a strain on their relationship. Dorothy is raising her son with her religious beliefs. After her son spends weekends with his father, he returns with comments like, "Daddy won't pray with me. He says it is not necessary." Her son also returns with discipline problems, which spill over to his behavior at the childcare center, for example, when he was reprimanded for using four-letter words. Further, Dorothy would not allow her son to play with guns or to have guns in her home. Yet the father keeps a gun in the house. Although out of reach of the son, Dorothy is anxious about this situation. She plans to raise these issues in court when the parenting plan is adjusted.

Natalie, a 24-year-old Hispanic mother, is concerned because her daughter's father constantly changes girlfriends. She feels this is confusing for their six-year-old daughter, who spends every other weekend with her father. The father pays child support regularly, and their relationship has been good; however, Natalie's concerns about the visits are creating anxiety about the impact of the visits on her daughter. If not for the court-ordered parenting plan, Natalie would consider limiting the visits.

Behaviors that could bring harm: substance abuse and partner abuse. In 17 of the 43 cases, the mother indicated that the father had a serious problem with substance abuse, causing concern that the father would use drugs or alcohol during visits with his children. This unease caused mothers to carefully evaluate their decision about visitation as shown in the following two examples. Alexis, a 39-year-old Hispanic mother, has two sons, ages 20 and seven, by two different fathers. With the first father-son situation, the father had been frequently in prison on drug-related charges. As a result, Alexis did not allow contact unless there was supervision. This father has since died, and the mother believes that problems that her 20-year-old son is now having may be related to having had no relationship with his father. As a result of this experience, she was determined that, with her second child, there would be a father-son relationship, even though she and the father did not get along well, and he abused alcohol. Although this father seldom saw his son when he was first born, once child support and the parenting plan were court-ordered, the father began regular visits. After one incident, when the father returned his son while under the influence of alcohol and Alexis refused to allow further visits, the father protested to the court. The court agreed with the mother. Alexis's decision to pursue a parenting plan, in spite of the father's substance abuse history, brought the reward that she was looking for in that the father and son now see each other regularly and have a positive relationship.

Carrie, a 36-year-old Caucasian mother, believes that the father-son relationship is beneficial for her son even though she receives no child support and the father has a
history of substance abuse. She will only allow her nine-year-old son to go with his father if she feels reasonably certain that he has not been using drugs or drinking alcohol at the time. The father visits irregularly, and to date, she has not been aware of any problems. However, she said, she is very nervous about the visits because she said, "I'm afraid he's out doing drugs." Both of these mothers reported allowing visits because they saw the benefits for their children in spite of concern about the fathers' behaviors.

Twenty-two mothers indicated there had been some degree of partner abuse, from one-time incidents to frequent, severe abuse. In all but one of the 22 cases, there were visits between child and father. In two cases, the mothers have minimized the risks by having court orders stating that visitation must be supervised through Kids' Exchange, a program providing contact for non-custodial parents.

Most of these mothers did not believe the fathers would abuse their children. Denise, a 24-year-old Hispanic mother with a two-year-old daughter, Marie, has encouraged visits in spite of concerns about the father's behavior. Denise left the father when he became abusive during the pregnancy. After several attempts at reconciliation, Denise left the relationship permanently after continued abuse and drinking by the father. She reports that she receives child support informally, and the father usually sees his daughter twice a week. Although she does not believe he would abuse his child, she is anxious about other behaviors, including his having taken Marie on a boat ride without a life jacket. Denise allows the visits because she thinks they are important for her daughter. She does not allow her daughter to stay overnight because she does not think the father has the parenting skills needed. However, Denise feels one has to deal with problems as they arise, helping the father to understand the safety issues. Denise has pointed out to him that, when he does not see his daughter regularly, Marie becomes ambivalent about being with him.

Inconsistency and broken promises. Mothers voiced concern about fathers who promised to visit or to buy things for their children and then did not follow through. Mothers had to weigh the choice of continuing to encourage a father-child relationship, perhaps raising their child's hopes, knowing the father was very unreliable, or discouraging visits in order to minimize disappointment. Mary, a 26-year-old Caucasian, whose son is nine, stated, "The inconsistency is very damaging to my son. Right now I'm hoping he [the father] does not turn back up again. I'm afraid of what's going to happen when he does ... in terms of how it affects my son." She has not been able to locate the father and does not receive any child support. He has called occasionally and has promised to visit or to send a gift but has only sent the promised gift once and has made no visits in more than a year.

There was also concern about inconsistency when fathers who had not been in their child's life for a long period of time showed up and then were gone again. As Jennie, a 27-year-old African-American mother stated, "I do believe that after a certain time period, it becomes detrimental to the child if they are absent too long ... especially if they are absent, show up, and then disappear again." According to Jennie, the father of her children has seen them twice in the past three years. When he first left, his child, who is now six, was only three. The mother described how difficult it was for her daughter to
accept his absence, saying her daughter would cry herself to sleep every night. For children who had not seen their father on a regular basis, the mothers had observed heartbreak and sadness. One mother, Terri, was successful in terminating parental rights after years of trying unsuccessfully to get the father to pay child support and to keep the visitation schedule that had been agreed upon. Terri decided that seeing the heartbreak her son would go through each time the father failed to appear was not worth the benefit of a father-child relationship.

CHILD'S DESIRE TO SEE THE FATHER

For many of the mothers, the most difficult aspect of coping with fathers' absence was the effect it had on their children. Further, if they chose to stop or to discourage visits, they felt anguish about their decisions. Congruent with the literature, fathers with younger children were more likely to be spending time with them. Nine of the 12 fathers with children under age two were seeing their child regularly. Thirteen of the 29 fathers with children between ages two and 10 were seeing those children regularly, but none of the five fathers with children over the age of 10 saw their child on a regular basis. Six fathers have never seen their child. The mothers were aware of how important the contact with the father could be for their child and felt they must carefully weigh their choices about visitation in regard to the child's feelings.

As young as two, children can understand that they have a father who is absent. Sharon, a 17-year-old Caucasian, wanted her son to know his father. Every night her two-year-old would kiss the only picture she had of her son's father, taken when her child was one month old. That was the only time the father and child had been together. Sharon was sad about this lack of contact and hoped in the future to convince the father to visit his son, even if he did not pay child support.

Another four-year-old, Nicole, was very upset that her mother, April, a 24-year-old Caucasian, had refused to let her father visit during the past year. April was aware of her daughter's feelings but felt she had no choice because of the father's substance abuse and her concern about how well he would supervise the daughter. This father, diagnosed with a mental disability, had been in prison on drug-related charges. He had also been abusive to April throughout their relationship. When she and the father initially broke off their relationship, the mother did allow supervised visits, as ordered by the court. April recently decided that the costs are too great, and she has stopped the visits, which has been very upsetting to Nicole.

Another mother reported that Stacy, her 10-year-old daughter of a father who has been in prison for armed robbery since she was one, sleeps with her father's picture and sometimes cries about her lack of contact with him. Stacy has gone to visit him in prison several times in the last three years, and they have been writing letters to each other regularly. She has been looking forward to the day that he will be released from prison, although the 26-year-old Hispanic mother, Esther, expressed apprehension that he may not be able to fulfill all of the promises he has made. As she said, "She talks about when he gets out. I tell her I don't know about that. We don't know what's going to happen
when he gets out.... I just hope he does what he says he will do." Realizing how important
the visits are to her daughter, Esther has been glad that her daughter has been having
more contact with her father.

MOTHERS' RELATIONSHIPS WITH THEIR OWN FATHERS

Another theme found to be important in mothers' decisions regarding father-child
relationships was the mother's relationship with her own father. Twenty-two of the
participants came from single-parent homes. A concern of these mothers was their
struggle with how to make the relationship between their child and the child's father
better than the one they had with their father. A 15-year-old Hispanic mother, Diana,
stated clearly that she would never prevent her two children from seeing their father, even
if he stopped paying child support. She has seen her own father very little since her
parents divorced and regrets this. The same was true of 31-year-old Caucasian mother.
Danielle, who felt that it was very important that fathers and daughters spend time
together. Her parents are divorced, and she sees her father approximately once every six
years. She does not want the same thing to happen to her daughter. As she said, "I think
that it's very important, especially for girls, to have a relationship with their fathers ... I
don't care about the child support. Just see Leah [the daughter]."

Tracy, a 20-year-old Hispanic mother, never knew her biological father and has had a
difficult relationship with her stepfather. With her own child, she has tried to establish a
relationship between father and daughter. After she was awarded child support, the father
made payments regularly and visited his child, even though during the pregnancy he had
ignored the mother. However, after he lost his job and stopped paying child support, the
visits ceased. He has not seen his daughter Alice, three years old, in over a year. Tracy
felt sad about this lack of contact, and she wanted to ensure that her daughter knew that it
was not her fault that the father had not come to see her. As she said, "I can't have my
daughter growing up not knowing who her father is--at least not knowing that I tried." 
Tracy documented her efforts to establish the father-daughter relationship but was so
angry that the father stopped paying child support and refused to visit his daughter that
she had this to say: "Out of anger I'm thinking about terminating his [parental] rights."
She indicated that the experience had been an agonizing one for her.

DISCUSSION

BENEFITS VERSUS COSTS

Custodial mothers can be expected to play a major role in the determination of how much
time their children will spend with their father. As suggested by exchange theory, this
study has found that mothers assess various factors, weighing the costs versus benefits of
the outcomes of their choices regarding visitation. Contrary to the expectation that child
support is seen as a necessary exchange in order for mothers to allow visitation, factors
other than payment of child support are instrumental in the mothers' decisions. The
choice regarding visits can be difficult as mothers try to balance their belief in the
benefits of a father-child relationship in exchange for concerns about the potential costs.
Wanting what is in the best interest of the child and being protective of their children, mothers worried about negative effects of the father-child relationship at the same time that they were eager for their child to know the father. Adding to this difficulty were the feelings of the child, who might have a strong desire to spend time with his/her father. The costs that mothers had to, and must, evaluate as they made their decisions included (1) lifestyle differences that can create conflict and confusion for the children and (2) behaviors of the father that are potentially dangerous to the child.

RECIPROcity AND PROFITABILITY

Mothers saw roles other than that of financial provider as having a value in their child's life. As one mother said, "It's more than the money issue ... a child needs to know who his father is." Therefore mothers may encourage father-child interactions even if there is no financial gain. Both reciprocity and profitability can result when mothers observe benefits for the child that may outweigh costs. These include:

* a greater likelihood of receiving child support;
* children's knowing and spending time with their fathers;
* fulfillment of their children's desire to spend time with the father; and
* the mothers' need to ensure that a father-child relationship develops differently from the relationships the mothers had with their own father.

When a successful relationship has developed between father and child, mothers observe their children as excited, happy, and enjoying the benefits of the exchanges.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The use of purposive and snowball sampling creates the possibility of selection bias since it is unknown how the women who participated might be different from women found in the population as a whole. Since this is not a random selection and included only 43 mothers, the information collected cannot be generalized to a larger population. However, qualitative research seeks to provide context for each individual's story rather than generalizability. Also, data are obtained from mothers only, and mothers' interpretations of fathers' behaviors cannot be confirmed. However, it is the mothers' subjective perceptions of the fathers that will influence their decisions regarding fathers' visitation with the child.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

These results inform efforts designed to increase responsible fatherhood. Assumptions about what parents in nonmarital situations want must be challenged. The image of the uninvolved or "deadbeat" father, particularly if he was not married to the mother, continues to prevail. The results of this study indicate that mothers as well as fathers want
the non-custodial parent to have a relationship with the child, even when the father does not pay child support.

However, fathers may assume that paying child support will guarantee that they will see their children. This study demonstrates that payment of child support will not necessarily result in visits. Mothers do want fathers involved in the lives of their children, but in a way that is safe and provides nurturance and growth for the child. What are the reasons that these relationships do not develop? In what way do current institutional practices create barriers to ongoing father-child relationships? Under what circumstances should fathers be denied contact with their children? The questions posed do not have simple answers since there are multiple factors that influence mothers' decisions about parent-child contact and fathers' responses. This study has begun to answer these questions and identify key determinants of mothers' decision-making. However, further research is needed to understand more clearly how mothers are influenced by their own family of origin as well as how men are influenced by the relationship they had with their fathers. Research should also evaluate how often fathers who pay child support, have parenting plans, and do not have any questionable behaviors, are allowed to see their child and when mothers' decisions to withhold visits are not justified.

Given the importance of fathers in their children's lives, as confirmed in this study by mothers who feel the loss of their own father, it is critical that efforts be made to bring parents together around issues pertaining to their children. As noted by McLanahan and Carlson (2002), public policy can improve the likelihood fathers will be involved with their children. Yet the Center on Fathers, Families, and Public Policy suggests that public policy is, in many cases, creating a barrier for young, never-married couples attempting to form a supportive network for their children (Ash, 1997). Currently there is an increasing focus on marriage initiatives for nonmarried parents in policy proposals. Although such initiatives are directed toward responsible parenting as well as promotion of marriage, there is no clear evidence that marital status is the causal factor in the differences between the well-being of children from two-parent families versus single-parent families (Jones-DeWeever, 2002).

Policies that would mandate visitation in exchange for payment of child support regardless of the situation or parents' wishes would seem unwise since they might increase conflict and would not likely ensure a father's strong commitment to his children. Concomitantly, policies that make it difficult for parents and children to have an ongoing relationship, when all parties find it in the best interest of the children, need to be reevaluated. Recommendations for policies that might keep fathers and children together throughout the child's life include (1) negotiating parenting plans at the same time as child support orders and make them as important as the payment of child support; (2) having family courts revisit parenting plans periodically to determine if there have been any changes in the behaviors of mothers or fathers that mandate a change in the amount of time either parent spends with the child; (3) making aggressive efforts in agencies to inform unmarried couples about child support policies and benefits of establishing paternity; (4) funding fathering programs that teach parenting skills, making both parents more confident in their parenting abilities; and (5) creating a more father-friendly
environment in programs that work with families, including having male staff. With so much at stake for the future of families and the well-being of children affected by parents' decisions, changes in policy are critical.

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