



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

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# Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight

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## Employment, Economic Stability & Father Involvement

Evidence suggests that men who are under financial strain or who have unstable employment have more problems being responsible fathers and establishing a household than do other fathers.<sup>34</sup> Lack of economic and employment stability are likely to matter for children's and fathers' well-being.

### Definitions

*Father involvement* refers to the type and level of a father's interaction with his children. Father involvement has been thought of as having three main dimensions: engagement (a father's involvement in shared activities with his child), accessibility (a father's availability to his child), and responsibility (the extent to which a father ensures that his child is safe and provides his child with resources, such as clothes, food, or financial support).<sup>19,20</sup>

*Economic stability* refers to the financial security of a household or an individual and is characterized by the presence of earnings, employment, and assets, as well as by the absence of financial strain.<sup>36,37</sup>

### Importance and Implications of Employment and Economic Stability

#### *Implications for Fathers*

Unemployment, job insecurity, and economic instability are all likely to negatively affect men's well-being.

- Unemployment or uncertainty about one's work situation may lead to stress that negatively affects psychological well-being.<sup>17,18</sup> People who are out of work are more likely to develop psychological problems when unemployment is long-term or recurring.<sup>3</sup>
  - Unemployment and economic strain are associated with higher levels of major depression, psychological distress, and stress, as well as with lower levels of hope.<sup>24,29,41</sup>
  - Unemployed men may have higher levels of psychological distress in part because adult men, especially fathers, are expected to be employed and to provide for their families. Not engaging in "normal" or expected behavior for one's role has been associated with psychological distress.<sup>23</sup>
  - Psychological well-being is also associated with whether individuals view unemployment as temporary, are optimistic about finding a new job, and feel capable of controlling their employment situation. Those who do not expect to have trouble finding new employment or who feel in control of their situation are less likely to experience psychological distress.<sup>25</sup>
- Unemployment is also associated with poorer physical health for men.<sup>26</sup> Long durations of unemployment occurring between the ages of 16 and 33 are associated with poorer health capital (a measure including body mass index, exercise, consumption of fresh fruit, and smoking) at age 33.<sup>43</sup>
- Long-term unemployment is associated with less supportive marriages<sup>7</sup> and with poorer socioeconomic capital (a concept that includes income, occupational status, and home ownership).<sup>43</sup>
- Unemployment is not the only risk factor for negative outcomes. Under certain conditions, employed fathers may also be at risk of poorer well-being.
  - For example, job insecurity – concern about whether one's job will exist in the future – is associated with psychological distress, including stress, anxiety, and depression.<sup>10,13,27,33</sup>

*Take Time to Be a Dad Today*

### *Implications for Fathers' Involvement with Children*

Employment status and economic stability may affect both the level and the quality of fathers' involvement with their children. The association between fathers' employment and involvement with their children may differ based on whether fathers live with their children.

#### *Resident Fathers*

- Some studies of married families have found that fathers who work more hours spend less time with their children<sup>30</sup> and that unemployed fathers are more involved with their children.<sup>31</sup>

#### *Nonresident Fathers*

Especially among nonresident fathers, a lack of good job opportunities is likely to contribute to low levels of father involvement and poor parenting.<sup>40</sup>

- Generally, employment<sup>12,16,21</sup> and higher income<sup>4,16</sup> are associated with more father involvement for nonresident fathers. These findings are especially evident among young, disadvantaged fathers.<sup>12,14</sup>
- Some evidence suggests that fathers who have "regular" employment – work that is consistent and legal – may be more involved with their children because they may hold more mainstream values about fathering and because regular and reliable income may help them better meet the role of provider.<sup>45</sup> This pattern is especially noticeable among African American fathers.<sup>45</sup>
- If nonresident fathers are unemployed or otherwise unable to provide financial support, mothers may engage in "gatekeeping" by restricting fathers' access to the child.<sup>6</sup>
- For nonresident fathers, paying child support also appears to be associated with higher levels of involvement.<sup>35</sup> This pattern suggests that nonresident fathers who have economic difficulties and are unable to pay formal or informal child support may also be less involved with their children on a day-to-day basis.

#### *Job Characteristics*

Fathers' employment, economic stability, and job characteristics are also important for understanding how fathers are involved with their children.

- Unemployment and job insecurity may act as stressors,<sup>2,15</sup> and a large body of research has found that stress is associated with poorer parenting behaviors, such as harsher and less responsive parenting and inconsistent discipline.<sup>5,11,38</sup>
- Economic pressure is associated with harsher parenting for fathers. Job loss and economic instability may be associated with less nurturing, more punitive, and more arbitrary parenting.<sup>22</sup> Fathers' unemployment is also associated with more severe child abuse among families in the welfare system.<sup>32</sup>
- Fathers' negative work experiences – lack of ability to make decisions about conflicts between work and family demands – are associated with the use of rejecting and punishing behaviors.<sup>39</sup>
- On the other hand, higher earnings are associated with more job autonomy (whether an individual has flexibility and freedom in his job), which itself is associated with warmer parenting.<sup>44</sup>

#### *Implications for Children*

Fathers' employment status and economic stability may have implications for children's well-being, both directly and as a result of fathers' parenting behaviors.

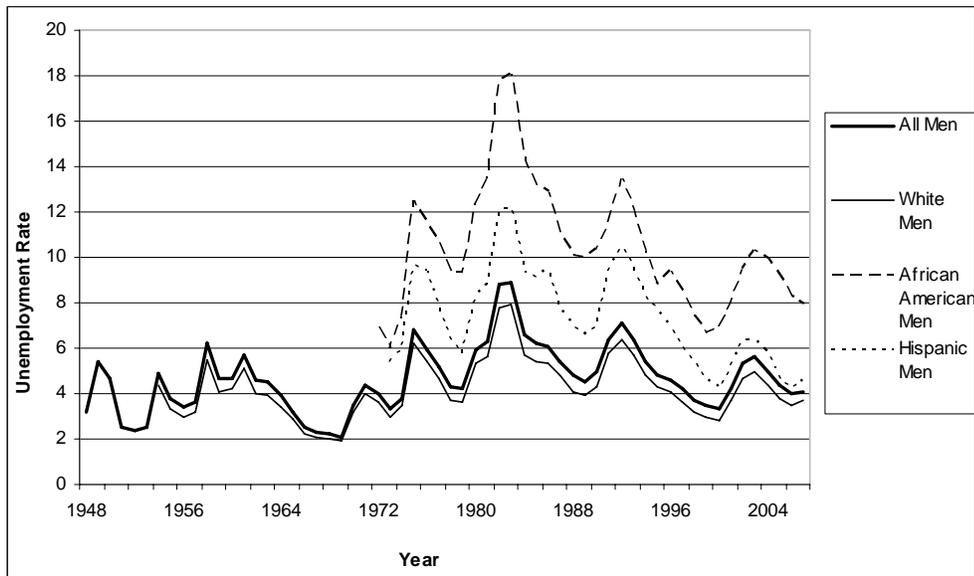
- Fathers' lack of employment may be directly associated with children's well-being. Young children whose fathers work fewer hours have more behavior problems than do children whose fathers work for more hours.<sup>28</sup> For middle school students, a household member's job loss is associated with a higher likelihood of smoking,<sup>42</sup> suggesting that children of fathers who become unemployed are at increased risk of negative outcomes.

- Children of fathers who engage in less positive parenting behaviors because of negative work experiences or economic pressure are more likely to act out and to have lower scores on measures of self-efficacy, i.e., how one feels about his or her ability to meet a goal or deal with the challenges of life.<sup>39,44</sup> By contrast, positive job experiences that are associated with positive changes in parenting behavior improve children’s self-efficacy.<sup>44</sup>
- Poverty also has negative effects on children’s well-being and development. Poor children are at risk for a range of negative outcomes at all ages, including low birthweight, higher mortality rates, greater risk of injuries, higher rates of asthma and chronic illness, lower educational attainment, lower IQ, poorer language proficiency, higher rates of internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems, higher rates of substance abuse, and higher rates of teen pregnancy and childbearing.<sup>1,8,9</sup>
  - This pattern suggests that children of fathers who are unemployed or are unable to provide sufficient financial resources are likely to have poorer outcomes than are children of fathers who are economically secure.

### Overall Trends in Unemployment Among Men

Figure 1 shows the average unemployment rate for men aged 20 and older over the past several decades. The figure shows that while changes in the unemployment rates of each racial/ethnic group have generally followed the same pattern over time, non-Hispanic black men and Hispanic men have consistently had higher than average unemployment rates, and non-Hispanic White men have consistently had slightly lower than average unemployment rates.

**Figure 1. Average Unemployment Rate for Men Aged 20 and Older, 1948-2007**



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2008

### Differences in Father Involvement

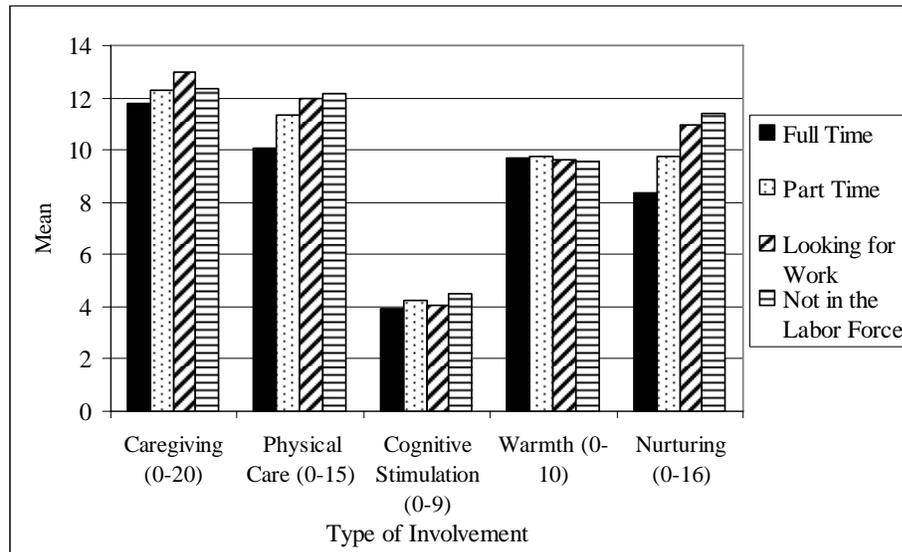
The following estimates are for fathers of infants (nine-month-old children).

#### *Resident Father Involvement by Employment Status*

Figure 2 and Table 1 show that resident fathers who are employed full time are generally less involved with their infants than are other resident fathers.

- Fathers who are employed full time are less involved than all other fathers in physical care and nurturing, are less involved in caregiving than are fathers who are looking for work or not in the labor force, and are less involved in engaging in cognitively stimulating activities with their infants than are fathers who are not in the labor force.
- Fathers who are employed part time are also less involved in physical care than are fathers who are not in the labor force. There are no differences by employment status when it comes to the warmth that fathers show towards their children.

**Figure 2: Resident Father Involvement by Employment Status**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 1: Differences in Resident Father Involvement by Employment Status**

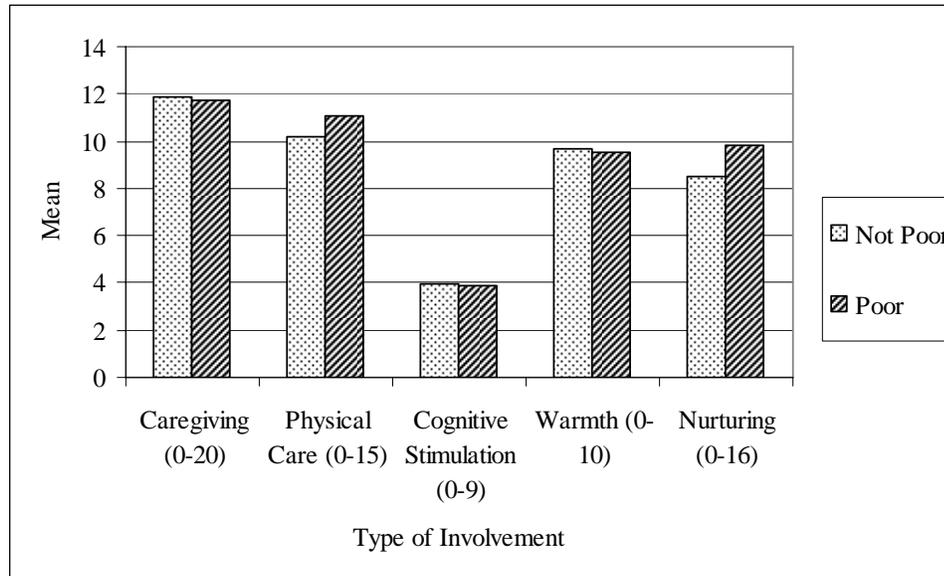
	Full Time	Part Time	Looking for Work	Not in the Labor Force	Possible Range
Caregiving	11.8 <sup>b,c</sup>	12.3	13.0	12.4	0-20
Physical Care	10.1 <sup>a,b,c</sup>	11.3 <sup>c</sup>	12.0	12.2	0-15
Cognitive Stimulation	3.9 <sup>c</sup>	4.2	4.1	4.5	0-9
Warmth	9.7	9.8	9.7	9.6	0-10
Nurturing	8.4 <sup>a,b,c</sup>	9.8 <sup>b,c</sup>	11.0	11.4	0-16

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data a = significantly different from fathers working part time; b = significantly different from fathers looking for work; c = significantly different from fathers not in the labor force

**Resident Father Involvement by Poverty Status**

As shown in **Figure 3** and **Table 2**, resident fathers' involvement with their infants differs based on household poverty status. Resident fathers with household incomes below the poverty line are more involved than are those with incomes above the poverty line in physical care and nurturing; however, they are slightly less likely to show warmth towards their children.

**Figure 3: Resident Father Involvement by Poverty Status**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 2: Differences in Resident Father Involvement by Poverty Status**

	Poor	Not Poor	Possible Range
Caregiving	11.7	11.9	0-20
Physical Care	11.1 <sup>d</sup>	10.2	0-15
Cognitive Stimulation	3.9	4.0	0-9
Warmth	9.5 <sup>d</sup>	9.7	0-10
Nurturing	9.8 <sup>d</sup>	8.5	0-16

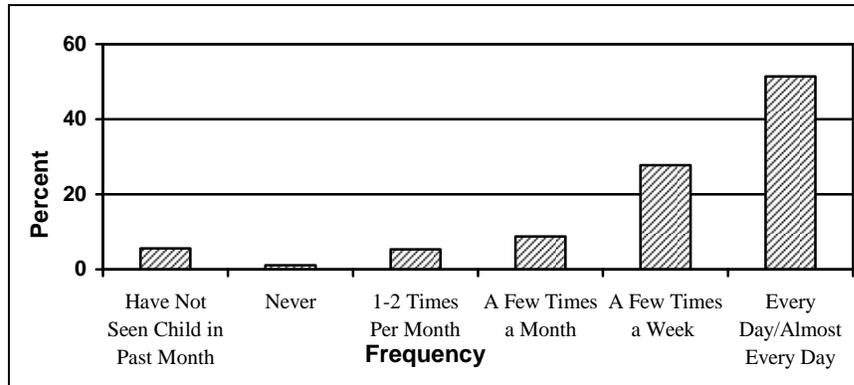
Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

<sup>d</sup> = significantly different from fathers with household incomes above the federal poverty line

*Nonresident Father Involvement*

**Figure 4** and **Table 3** show the frequency with which nonresident fathers have spent more than one hour with their children in the past month. More than one-half of fathers reported that they spent more than an hour with their child every day (51.4 percent).

**Figure 4: Frequency of Nonresident Father Involvement**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 3: Frequency of Nonresident Father Involvement**

Frequency	Percent
Have Not Seen Child in Past Month	5.6%
Never	2.1%
1-2 Times Per Month	5.4%
A Few Times Per Month	8.7%
A Few Times Per Week	27.8%
Every Day/Almost Every Day	51.4%

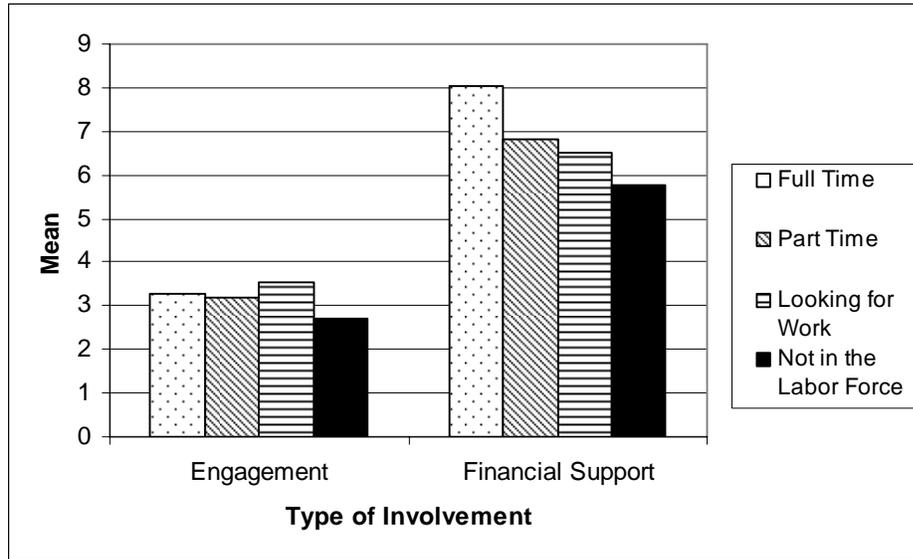
Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

*Nonresident Father Involvement by Employment Status*

**Figure 5** and **Table 4** show that nonresident fathers' involvement with their infants differs based on their employment status.

- Nonresident fathers who are employed full time, as well those who are looking for work, are significantly more engaged with their children than are nonresident fathers who are not in the labor force.
- Nonresident fathers who have full-time employment report a significantly higher level of financial contributions to their child's household than do all other nonresident fathers.

**Figure 5: Nonresident Father Involvement by Employment Status**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 4: Differences in Resident Father Involvement by Employment Status**

	Full Time	Part Time	Looking for Work	Not in the Labor Force	Possible Range
Engagement	3.3 <sup>c</sup>	3.2	3.5 <sup>c</sup>	2.7	0-4
Financial Support	8.0 <sup>a,b,c</sup>	6.8	6.5	5.8	0-12

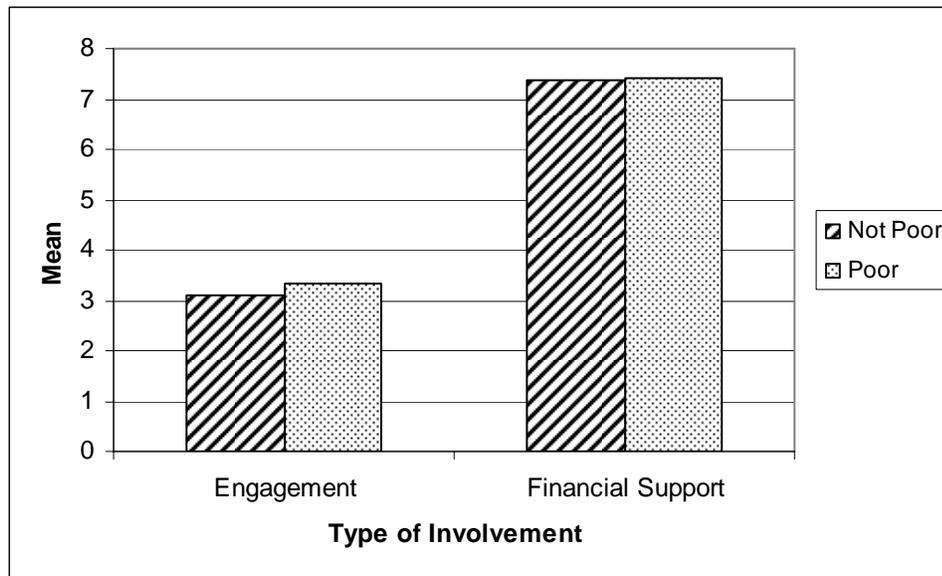
Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

a = significantly different from fathers working part time; b = significantly different from fathers looking for work; c = significantly different from fathers not in the labor force

*Nonresident Father Involvement by Poverty Status*

**Figure 6** and **Table 5** show that nonresident fathers' involvement with their infants does not differ based on the poverty status of the child's household. Fathers are similarly engaged with children and contribute similarly to the child's household whether it is below or above the federal poverty line.

**Figure 6: Nonresident Father Involvement by Poverty Status**



Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Table 5: Differences in Resident Father Involvement by Poverty Status**

	Poor	Not Poor	Possible Range
Engagement	3.3	3.1	0-4
Financial Support	7.4	7.4	0-12

Source: Child Trends' analysis of ECLS-B 9-month data

**Definitions and Measurement**

In the ECLS-B, resident fathers are defined as those who lived with their children when the focal child was approximately nine months old (2001-2002); by contrast, nonresident fathers are those who did not live with their focal child at that age. For resident fathers, involvement was measured using five groups of activities: caregiving (how often the father diapers, feeds, or prepares food for the child), physical care (how often the father bathes the child, dresses the child, takes the child on walks, and takes the child on errands), cognitive stimulation (how often the father reads books, sings songs, and tells stories to the child), warmth (how often the father tickles or holds the child), and nurturing (how often the father is the person who wakes up with the child at night, soothes the child when he/she is upset, takes the child to the doctor, and stays home when the child is sick). For nonresident fathers, involvement was assessed with two measures: engagement (how often in the past month the father spent more than one hour with the child) and financial support (how often the father gives money to the child's household for toys, clothes, and presents; medicine; child care; and other needs).

### Data Sources

Data documenting trends in unemployment were collected in the Current Population Survey and reported by the U.S. Census Bureau's Bureau of Labor Statistics. Additional data on father involvement, employment, and economic stability were gathered from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) 9-month Resident and Nonresident Father Surveys collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

The ECLS-B is a nationally representative, longitudinal survey of 10,688 American children born in 2001. The ECLS-B follows these children from infancy until the time they enter first grade, and it collects data through parent interviews, direct child assessments, birth certificate data, and interviews with children's caregivers and teachers.

### Data Limitations

Data on unemployment rates over time are not available for specific racial/ethnic groups in all years. These data are not limited to fathers and instead include all men over the age of 20. Furthermore, according to Census Bureau classifications, Hispanic men may be of any race; in other words, some men may be categorized as both "Hispanic" and as "white" or "black" and thus counted twice. Additionally, unemployment rates include only those individuals who do not have a job, have actively looked for work in the prior four weeks, and are currently available for work, and so may underestimate actual rates of those who are out of work (e.g., those who have stopped looking for a job).

### Resources

The **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Promoting Responsible Fatherhood Initiative** includes an economic stability component, offering research and information on programs intended to encourage father involvement by increasing men's employment

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