



Fact Sheet

It's Not All about Money: Non-Financial Ways Non-Custodial Parents Can Help Their Families

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In nearly every culture, marriage has been the main institution that binds men to their families. Through the institution of marriage, societies have legitimized the masculine role, connected men to women and to future generations, and held men accountable to their children and to their family responsibilities. When marriage fails, or fails to form, when mothers and fathers do not commit to one another, nurturing fatherhood typically dwindles away. Over time, unmarried and divorced fathers tend to disengage from their children, both emotionally and financially. Research by Rangarajan and Gleason¹ supports this finding and states that unmarried African American fathers were more likely to spend time with their children than were unwed white and Hispanic fathers; however, over time, single fathers of all races tend to separate from their children. This trend of father-absence must be reversed because there is a wealth of literature which indicates that father involvement is associated with a number of positive child-outcomes: higher IQs and cognitive capacity, more emotionally secure, etc.² There are studies which also indicate the importance of the positive roles that noncustodial fathers play.^{3,4}

Fathers matter; however, social welfare policies have historically given scant attention to the positive contributions fathers can play in the lives of their children aside from the financial aspects. In the influential article “Capabilities and Contributions of Unwed Fathers,”⁵ Robert Lerman argues that stringent child support policies aren’t enough to keep fathers involved. Unwed fathers, he argues, should be provided with relationship education, including communication and conflict resolution skills. Lerman also suggests that policymakers should explore programs and strategies to assist the unwed or non-custodial father in finding employment. According to Lerman,

“Men who lose touch with their children are likely to see their earnings stagnate, provide less financial support, and often face new obligations when they father children with another partner. By contrast, the unwed fathers who marry or cohabit with their child’s mother earn considerably higher wages and work substantially more than unwed fathers who do not marry or cohabit.”

The research shows that, among families involved with the child welfare system,⁶

- involvement by non-resident fathers is associated with more reunifications and fewer adoptions;
- higher levels of non-resident father involvement substantially lower the likelihood of later maltreatment allegations;
- children of highly involved non-resident fathers exited foster care faster; and
- children who had had contact with a non-custodial parent in the last year were 46% less likely to enter foster care.

Keeping Fathers Connected to Their Children

If fathers want to assist in the rearing of their non-custodial children, then service providers must explore mechanisms to assist them. In the past, the assumption was that absent fathers don't care; this assumption about the dead-beat dad is slowly changing but a paradigm shift among providers is warranted. For example, the Federal Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs)⁷ have found that many states:

- do not adequately involve fathers in case planning or provide services for them;
- fail to contact fathers, even when they have been involved in their children's lives; and
- do not adequately involve fathers in any aspect of their child's case.

The CSFRs found that states fared better with providing services to noncustodial mothers. Specifically, "...cases were more likely to be rated as a strength for items relating to the provision of services for mothers than fathers."⁸ A careful reading of the Federal Child and Family Services Review will show that states must do a better job in promoting the relationship of the child in care with both the mother and father.

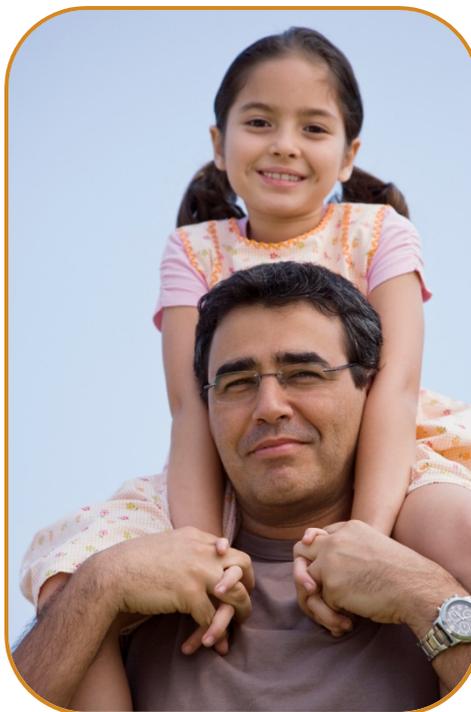
For those children not under the care of the state, non-custodial parents should be encouraged, and perhaps even taught, to assist in their children's activities of daily living. This could include care of the child while the custodial parent works or seeks work, as well as assistance with routine

household chores. These chores could include doing the laundry, preparing and serving meals, shopping, and cleaning. It could also include making sure that very young children are escorted to - and older children arrive at - medical and other therapeutic appointments (e.g., speech therapy, occupational therapy for physically challenged). Arranging for and following up on parent-teacher meetings, attending school activities (e.g., concerts, plays, art exhibits) and recreational programs are all important and valued. The latter is especially critical if children are to be reared with an appreciation for physical exercise and activity. It is a preventive strategy against both childhood and adult obesity. Providing these types of assistance is important because children will emulate work and caring behavior. The argument is that work - even uncompensated work around the house - can be a contribution to the custodial parent's household. Perhaps more importantly, in the absence of financial help, it can be the non-custodial parent's

contribution to the development of children, stability of families, and improvement of neighborhoods. Another benefit for non-custodial helpers is that they empower themselves when they help their children and may become closer to them.

Many men, especially minority males, are trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty and are unable, unprepared, and sometimes initially unwilling to assist in the healthy nurturing and development of their families. With the continuing recession, men are beginning to move into jobs and women are falling behind. Thus, these observations

about men are increasingly relevant for women as they as a group face on-going unemployment. Other than poverty, many men and women involved in the child support



enforcement system have low literacy rates, suffer from substance abuse, and often are under the control of the criminal justice system. All of these factors contribute to parents not devoting attention to their children.

Professionals must understand that parents who are not working may be challenged with problems related to developmental delays, dysfunctional behavior, reduced social skills, and depression.^{9, 10}

The professional service provider must stress to their clients that they will need to first address their own social stigmas and sense of uselessness to be successful in their parental role. It must be reinforced that when they have brought children into the world, they have a major stake in the upbringing, development, and the future of the child. Non-custodial parents can learn to become useful to the family by carrying out important care-giving roles. They can also be helpful in the schools and community. In many if not most instances, non-custodial parents cannot take these steps alone and be successful. Some training and attitudinal preparation will be needed and warranted and can be provided by social agencies, churches, faith-based organizations, and other community organizations. Fathers will need to learn how to act in ways that will evoke positive rather than negative responses from their children and the mothers of their children, who might not welcome the fathers' involvement owing to power dimensions in relationships.

Conclusion and Implications

There is value in exposing children (i.e., the next generation) to work and work-oriented behaviors by both the custodial and non-custodial parent. This includes the practice of socializing children to such useful concepts as time, time management, and cause and effect, which might not otherwise take place in the absence of a daily structure organized in part around work contribution. The issues presented also address structural problems relative to

labor supply (i.e., human capital development) in contrast to structural problems related to the economic system. Historically, the latter has tended to be more difficult to penetrate or change. Given this reality, there are things that professional service providers can do to help non-custodial parents play a vital role in their children's lives:

- Encourage them to participate in community/school volunteer service; there is value in exposing children to work and work-oriented behaviors.
- Help men navigate the system and establish reasonable payment schedules and modify arrearages where applicable. Existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment create obstacles and disincentives to father involvement. The disincentives are compelling enough to result in a phenomenon dubbed "underground fathers" - men who acknowledge paternity and are involved in the lives of their children but who refuse to participate as fathers in the formal systems.
- Steer men to self-help groups and counsel them when this situation presents itself. The behavior of young parents, both fathers and mothers, is influenced significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices within families of origin. Many of these beliefs are rooted in outdated conceptions of the male-bread winner role. Women are now working in every segment of the economy and sex roles common to a generation or two ago must be reversed or modified.

Notes

- ¹ Rangarajan, A. & Gleason, P. (1998). Young unwed fathers of AFDC children: Do they provide support? *Demography*, 35(2), 175-186.
- ² Sigle-Rushton, W. & McLanhan, S. (2002). *Father Absence and Child Well-being: A Critical Review*. Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation: Working Paper #02-20. Retrieved from: <http://www.rwjf.org/pr/product.jsp?id=14483>
- ³ Lerman, R. I. (2010). Capabilities and contributions of unwed fathers. *Future of Children*, 20(2), 63-85.
- ⁴ Clayton, O., Mincy, R., & Blankenhorn, D. (2003). *Black Fathers in Contemporary American Society*. Russell Sage Foundation: New York.
- ⁵ See note 3 above.
- ⁶ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. *Federal Child and Family Services Review: Aggregate Report: Round 2; Fiscal Years 2007-2010*, 32-50. Retrieved from: www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwmonitoring/results/fcfsr_report.pdf
- ⁷ These Reviews focus on children under state control: www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwmonitoring
- ⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. *Federal Child and Family Services Review: Aggregate Report; Round 2; Fiscal Years 2007-2010*, 65. Retrieved from: www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/cwmonitoring/results/fcfsr_report.pdf
- ⁹ Dew, M. A., Penkower, L., & Bromet, E.J. (1991). Effects of unemployment on mental health in the contemporary family. *Behavior Modification*, 15 (4), 401-544.
- ¹⁰ Hopps, J.G., Pinderhughes, E. & Shanker, R. (1995). *Power to Care: Clinical Practice with Overwhelmed Clients*. Free Press: New York.

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