

Promoting Responsible Fatherhood **Some Promising Strategies**

By Megan Burns

One of the key successes of welfare reform has been in the increase of low-income single mothers in the labor force. Due in part to a strong economy and the 1996 welfare reform law, 16 percent more poor moms entered the labor force over the past six years. However, evidence suggests poor men did not fare as well. Because the first round of welfare reform required mothers to work, this next round should issue a similar challenge to fathers in order to help them become current and continue to pay child support.

According to the Urban Institute, about two-thirds of the nearly 11 million American fathers who do not live with their children fail to pay child support.¹ Therefore it is no surprise that children who grow up fatherless are five times more likely to be poor.²

Social researchers also note that while women flooded the labor market, poor men did not. For example, during the 1990s, the labor force participation of young black women rose 18 percent, whereas the participation rate among low-income, non-college-educated black men actually fell by almost 10 percent.³

In recent months, policymakers have increasingly begun to recognize that bringing fathers into the work-based system created by the 1996 law will be the next critical step in finishing the job of welfare reform. While "responsible fatherhood" programs have sprouted across the country, fatherhood and family formation promise to be central issues in the reauthorization of welfare reform legislation this year.

Promoting responsible fatherhood is two-fold. First and foremost, we must extend the same work obligation placed on women to fathers of poor children, so that dads can pay child support. Child support is an important source of income for poor children, in that it accounts for over one-quarter of their family's income.⁴

The second aspect of promoting responsible fatherhood is involving dads in their children's lives. On the whole, kids who grow up in single-parent families are more likely to suffer from serious emotional consequences. For example, the likelihood that a young male will engage in criminal activity doubles if he is raised without his father.⁵

To ensure that fathers live up to their responsibilities, work requirements and stringent child support enforcement should remain a top priority. Of equal importance, however, is providing poor fathers with the supports they need to find employment and become financially responsible for their children. Promoting responsible fatherhood will require the full integration of poor fathers into the new social services system created by welfare reform. For example, fathers should have full access to the panoply of services now available to young women working their way off welfare.

Various specialized "responsible fatherhood" programs have already taken promising first steps in this direction. And indeed, effective fatherhood programs can and should play a significant part in extending the successes of welfare reform to poor fathers. The most valuable of these programs are those that offer a full array of resources for fathers seeking to support their children, both economically and emotionally. These services include job placement, training, and other assistance in overcoming barriers to employment, such as a substance abuse problem or a criminal record. They can also include a variety of counseling and related services, such as classes in parenting skills, dispute mediation, or anger management.

To maximize the promise of these programs, policymakers should pursue the following strategy:

- *Encourage a two-pronged approach to responsible fatherhood.* Fatherhood programs should require work first so that fathers may become more financially responsible for their children. Second, fatherhood programs should promote emotional connections between fathers and their children. This policy brief describes several groundbreaking programs across the country that follow this model and deserve widespread replication.
- *Provide public support to promising programs.* Sen. Evan Bayh (D-Ind.) has proposed legislation that would, among other things, authorize block grants of \$50 million a year through 2006 to state and local governments to fund fatherhood programs. Sen. Bayh's Responsible Fatherhood Act, co-sponsored by Rep. Julia Carson (D-Ind.), would also create a national clearinghouse for best practices.
- *Fund continuing research on best practices.* Because fatherhood programs are relatively new, rigorous research and evaluation are all the more critical to determine which models work most effectively. Fatherhood programs should be geared to produce measurable results in improving the lives of the children and fathers they serve.

First Generation Fatherhood Programs

Fatherhood programs are not, in fact, new. The first large-scale program, Parents' Fair Share (PFS), was launched in the early 1990's, when the fatherhood movement was just beginning to take shape in the national arena. Although the program was largely a disappointment, its shortcomings have provided valuable lessons to a new generation of practitioners.

The Parents' Fair Share demonstration project was an employment and training program aimed at increasing the earnings of non-custodial fathers unable to pay child support due to lack of or low income. Funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Labor, and private sponsors, PFS opened its doors in cities in seven states: California, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, New Jersey, Ohio, and Tennessee. Each of these sites offered a program with the following core components:

- employment services, including job search and training;
- peer support groups;
- mediation services to help foster communication between the noncustodial father and mother; and
- individualized child support payments to reflect both increased earnings and ability to pay.

Despite this seemingly comprehensive approach, PFS failed to increase participants' employment and earnings and failed to significantly improve the level of parental involvement with their children. Moreover, the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), which evaluated the program, found that what looked like gains in child support collections included amounts paid by men who were already employed and disqualified from the program.⁶

MDRC blamed the weak results in large part on program design. For example, employment services tended to focus on job search and training, rather than actual work experience. MDRC recommended in its report on PFS that future programs should include community service work experience for men who could not find private sector jobs, use providers experienced with working with highly disadvantaged clients, and provide job-retention services.⁷ MDRC also recommended better coordination with the child support enforcement system and greater involvement of custodial mothers in negotiating fathers' visitation arrangements.

A look at the new generation of fatherhood programs shows that these lessons from PFS have been taken to heart.

Promising Practices

Thanks in part to the lessons learned from PFS, successful fatherhood programs today offer an intensive array of services that are better aimed at putting fathers to work and keeping them there.

Of the many state and local fatherhood initiatives that have arisen in recent years, a number have received widespread attention for their innovative programs and their ability to assist fathers effectively. All of these programs put dads on the dual track toward financial responsibility for and emotional involvement with their children by offering a two-part package of services: employment and job assistance, and social services counseling.

Noncustodial Parent Employment Project (NCEP)

The Noncustodial Parent Employment Project (NCEP) is one of the country's largest and most established fatherhood programs. NCEP was created by the Florida legislature in 1995 as a \$750,000 pilot project and is run by Gulf Coast Community Care, a nonprofit community organization focused on family services. Since it opened its doors in 1996, NCEP has assisted more than 4,600 unemployed and underemployed noncustodial parents in 10 Florida counties. Parents (mainly fathers) who have children, are not making their child support payments, and receive public assistance are court-ordered into NCEP. The only alternative to the program is incarceration. The program seeks to establish a pattern of regular child support payments by obtaining and maintaining unsubsidized employment, preferably in jobs that pay higher than minimum wage.

Here's how it works:

- *Individual attention.* Each new client is given a caseworker and is granted a 30-day reprieve in order to find a job. If he is unable to find a job, his skills are assessed and he is offered job, parenting, and substance abuse counseling. The NCEP program also assists participants by providing bus tokens, paying for car repairs, or buying required work clothes. Additionally, once working, employment specialists make weekly work-site visits and check in with the employers.
- *Enforcement.* Program participants must remain in NCEP until they have worked six consecutive months. Odds are, if someone keeps a job for half a year, that person will continue to work.⁹ If a participant quits, they are held in contempt of court and an arrest warrant is issued. However, noncustodial parents may remain in the program as long as they wish.
- *Direct Payment.* A unique feature of this program is the teaming up of the courts, NCEP, and employers. After finding a job through NCEP, the courts require the employers to withhold a portion of each participant's paycheck for current and back child support. This takes the guesswork out of a confusing process that fathers often face.

This program differs from other successful programs, in that it focuses only on employment and does not promote emotional support for children. However, NCEP states that noncustodial parents are more involved with their children and they report seeing their children twice as often as before starting the program.

Gulf Coast's efforts have benefited over 12,200 of Florida's children and 4,600 of Florida's noncustodial parents since its inception. The NCEP generated more money than the program's actual cost. For every dollar spent on the program, they recouped four dollars for the state in child support payments.⁹ Furthermore, according to the Department of Revenue, 55 percent of all program-generated child support payments are coming from former program participants.¹⁰ This amounted to over \$1.1 million as of mid-1999.

Additionally, the dependence upon social services dropped. After program completion, 73 percent fewer participants received food stamps and 24 percent fewer mothers were on welfare after their child's father was enrolled.

The Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development (CFWD)

The Center for Fathers, Families, and Workforce Development specifically tailors its services to meet the particular needs of each father. It is committed to helping fathers financially and emotionally, by strengthening families and individual relationships with their children. Created in 1999 in Baltimore, Md., CFWD offers a job readiness program, support services, and long-term monitoring to an average of 180 noncustodial fathers a year.

CFWD successfully partners with STRIVE Baltimore (Support and Training Results in Valuable Employees) to operate a three-week job training program that attempts to mimic the demands of a real job. STRIVE, which was created in East Harlem in 1985 and now operates in five major cities throughout the United States, annually secures employment for over 3,000 people. Expected to arrive on time and dressed appropriately, STRIVE participants work 9-5 on "hard skills" like language and literacy development, as well as "soft skills" like behavior development.

STRIVE recognizes the overwhelming barriers to employment and the significant gaps in workforce involvement for the men and women STRIVE Baltimore serves. Through the training program, participants also receive help in finding jobs, and STRIVE often partners with local employers, such as the American Red Cross, Federal Express, and Verizon, to help place enrollees. STRIVE Baltimore boasts a success rate of 83 percent of graduates maintaining employment for 6 months and 74 percent keeping their jobs for one year.

CFWD's Men's Services program offers a comprehensive support service which includes parenting education, peer support, and a "co-parenting advisory group" to assist fathers in working out visitation, custody, and other parental arrangements. Teamed with the Ford Foundation, the Center for Impact Research, and the National Center for Strategic Nonprofit Planning and Community Leadership (NPCL), CFWD also offers domestic violence counseling, to assist men who have the propensity to engage in violent behavior.

Like all fatherhood projects, many of the fathers who enter CFWD's program owe significant amounts of back child support. And for some fathers, especially those whose child support obligations continued to accrue while they were incarcerated, unemployed, or otherwise unable to keep current with their payments, these arrearages present both an insurmountable financial burden and a disincentive to pay their current support obligations. To get dads started on paying child support, CFWD partnered with Maryland State Owed Arrears Leveraging Program, which provides for the full or partial forgiveness of child support arrearages if a noncustodial parent meets his current support obligations. Fathers who successfully complete the CFWD and STRIVE programs are eligible to participate in this program.

In order to ease the transition into the workforce, CFWD is the first program to offer long-term monitoring and support, which gives noncustodial fathers a safety net. Once leaving the program, participants are monitored and given access to CFWD's support services for up to 2 years. This continuing support ensures that participants remain on the right track to responsible fatherhood.

The Father to Father Project

The three-year-old Father to Father Project has served the Charleston, S.C., community by offering a path toward responsible fatherhood. Funded by the Sisters of Charity Foundation of South Carolina, the Father to Father project often relies on word of mouth from former graduates, but also accepts referrals from the Department of Social Services and the Public Defender's

Office. The program has an innovative feature which is a 24-week "rolling" program, that is, the 24 classes are taught continuously, so a father can enter the program at anytime.

The program offers the following solutions to fatherlessness:

- *Legal services.* Legal obstacles can prevent a father from becoming a viable part of a child's life. The legal part of the program includes teaching fathers their legal rights and responsibilities in South Carolina. The classes address issues such as, "Resolving Child Support Issues in Family Court," "How to Legally Re-Enter Your Child's Life After a Long Separation," and "How to Mediate a Meaningful Visitation Agreement."
- *Anger management, building self-esteem and communications.* Communication barriers between mothers and fathers can be burdensome on fathers who wish to form relationships with their child. The Father to Father project seeks to strengthen communication skills by offering mediation services, and individual counseling, as well as couples counseling.
- *Job skills.* With the help of staff, each father's educational level and acquired job training is assessed in order to develop a career goal and an attainable path toward that goal. Training sessions include interviewing techniques, resume preparation, job retention, and money management skills. Additionally, fathers may take advantage of a job referral service, using the skills they obtained to land a job. Unfortunately, the Father to Father project does not track its graduates after employment, and therefore there is no data on job success.

The Father to Father project began with one father, and now in its third year, serves 55. Mainly a grassroots effort, the project is not able to provide the same comprehensive services as other larger programs, which serve hundreds, but still, the Father to Father project is able to make a difference in some fathers' lives.

Texas Fragile Families Initiative (TFFI)

The Texas Fragile Families Initiative is an innovative statewide program that networks 12 fatherhood programs and local collaborating agencies, like the YMCA. Through a partnership of the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health and the Center for Public Policy Priorities, the Texas Fragile Families Initiative was modeled after Parents Fair Share and Partners for Fragile Families pilot projects and launched in July 2000. Each program site has a unique target population and effectively meets individual community needs.

Here are some of the examples:

- *Austin.* The target population in Austin is fathers of babies to teen mothers who are receiving prenatal care at the People's Community Clinic. Among the many services provided, the Austin program focuses on mediation services, family counseling, job search and training, and child support education.
- *Houston.* With the Chicano Family Center, the Houston site offers English as a Second Language and GED classes to young Hispanic fathers. It also offers programs similar to Austin's and many other individual sites, like job training and job search services. Unique to Houston and other fatherhood programs, TFFI also offers car-seat training for both parents.
- *Huntsville.* Reaching out to young African American fathers in Walker County who attend Huntsville Independent School District or Sam Houston State University, this program site focuses on job readiness training and placement, as well as parent education and childcare services.
- *Dads and Dozers (DADs) and Moms on Machines (MOMs).* Being launched at three sites, this job training program teams with TEEX Heavy Machinery Operator Training, to

provide a five-week, cost effective training program to prepare both low-income moms and dads for construction jobs. In order to better facilitate the trainees, TEEX provides substance abuse screening and child support flexibility. The DADs and MOMs program has a successful 100 percent graduation rate.

So far, after approximately eight months of full operation, TFFI has served just fewer than 400 dads. Poor reporting has plagued data outcome for TFFI, and as of yet there has been no third-party collector. But preliminary data suggests that 30 percent of the fathers who had not already done so, established paternity after completing the program.

TFFI has unique, widespread state support from both public and private ventures. The Texas Attorney General's office has opened its doors to helping low-income fathers by participating in the training of local staff and proposing some policy changes. Additionally, the Texas Youth Commission, which runs the state juvenile correction system, has changed visitation rights to support institutionalized fathers by allowing diapers, bottles, toys, and other necessary childcare items to be carried into the facility.

The Texas Fragile Families Initiative is the gold standard of statewide programs. Unlike CFWD or NCEP, TFFI offers a unique approach to fatherhood promotion by offering specialized programs that focus on community-based needs. Each of these specialized programs shares the same focus as other fatherhood initiatives: financial responsibility partnered with emotional communication.

Conclusion

Effective policies to promote responsible fatherhood must rely on more than mere exhortations. Many fathers need significant assistance in becoming financially responsible for or emotionally involved with their children, whether it be job training or other employment services, or intensive case management and counseling. The model programs described in this report are outstanding examples of effective strategies for helping fathers and they deserve replication nationwide. Coupled with work requirements and increasingly tough enforcement of child support, these programs should go a long way toward helping dads be where they should be: with their children.

Endnotes

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