

# The relationship between non-marital fathers' social networks and social capital and father involvement

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## ABSTRACT

Literature and research examining father involvement has focused primarily on outcomes associated with the well-being and development of children. Receiving limited attention in this literature has been the examination of the contextual factors associated with fathers and how these factors shape fathers' involvement with their young children. Addressing this limitation, this study focuses on the intra- and interdependent networks non-marital fathers maintain and utilize in fulfilling their parental responsibilities of father involvement. Results of the regression models indicate that non-marital fathers' relationship with their former spouse or partner and involvement with informal networks is positively associated with their involvement with young children. Policy and practice implications are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

Given the profound changes to American families, including an increase in the number of non-marital childbirths, marital dissolutions, single-parent households and children not living with their fathers, the examination of fathers and their involvement in their children's lives has contributed substantially to the child and family literature. Child development literature has given considerable attention to studying father involvement and provides evidence supporting the positive contributions of father involvement towards enhancing children's family and peer relations, academic achievement, cognitive, behavioural and emotional development, and socio-economic status (Cabrera *et al.* 2000; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera 2002; Lamb 2004). However, limited attention has been given to examining the contextual factors in which fathers who are not married and living with their children reside and function, and how these factors affect whether these fathers fulfil or fail to fulfil their parenting responsibilities, including involvement with their young children (Belsky 1984; Anderson *et al.* 2005; Degarmo *et al.* 2008).

Although there has been an increase in the literature regarding father involvement, limited research examines father involvement from the perspective of fathers who are not married, have never been married, and do not reside with their children. Additionally, insufficient research examines the intra- and interdependent social networks<sup>1</sup> of non-resident fathers and how those networks contribute to their involvement with their children. Conducting this research may help policy-makers, researchers and practitioners in developing and implementing policies and practices directed towards non-resident fathers. In particular, this study examines three types of contextual factors associated with father involvement. The first factor examines non-resident fathers' relationship with their former spouse or partner. The second factor examines non-resident fathers' involvement with informal networks of family and friends. The third factor examines non-resident fathers' involvement with formal networks of organizational and institutional supports. Each factor has different policy and programmatic implications for non-resident fathers in their involvement with their children.

## THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study emphasizes the familial, social, cultural, economic and institutional relationships, and networks non-resident fathers maintain, as well as the tangible and intangible benefits accruing to non-resident fathers because of these relationships and networks (White 2002). Defined as the sum of resources accruing to an individual or group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships, social network and social capital theory is aligned with the processes of social networking by which individuals or groups produce, reproduce and consolidate advantage (Granovetter 1973; Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1990). The assumption underlying this study is fathers' relationship with their former spouse or partner and involvement with family, friends and organizations will contribute to their development as fathers and assist them in maintaining involvement with their children.

Applied to the study of families and households, the inclusion of social network and social capital theory have primarily focused on direct and indirect benefits accruing to divorced mothers and their children, most notably in the areas of performance, satisfaction outcomes, and attainment of employment and income (Portes 1998; Lin 2000; Edwards *et al.* 2003). To a lesser degree has social network and social capital theory emphasized the benefits accruing to non-resident fathers through networks of family, friends and organizations, which may lead to involvement with their children. By considering the various transactions of information, support and access to opportunities non-resident fathers receive through their environment, a more balanced picture of non-resident fathers in their involvement with their children can be achieved.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Fathers

Demographic trends in the United States indicate that a significant and increasing proportion of fathers are marginal or transient members of their children's lives. In 1999, 33% of all children born in the United States were born outside of marriage, a six fold increase since 1940. Non-marital birth rates are much higher for African-Americans (69%) and Hispanics (41%) than for European Americans (26%) (Ventura & Bachrach 2000; Coley 2001). The proportion of

children who live with only one parent at some point during their childhood is expected to increase and exceed 50% in the future (Cabrera *et al.* 2000). Although some non-resident parents reside together, only 30% of African-American, 54% of Hispanic and 70% of European-American children lived with their biological fathers in 1993 (Coley 2001).

The increasing number of non-resident fathers represents a trend that is exacerbated by fathers' lack of contact with their children (Lerman & Ooms 1993). Although, at the time of their children's birth, most non-resident fathers appear to have intentions of being involved fathers (Johnson 2000), numerous studies have found that only half of non-resident fathers have regular contact with their children during the first years after their child's birth (Lerman & Ooms 1993; Coley & Chase-Lansdale 1999) and rates of contact decrease as children mature from pre-school age to adolescence (Furstenberg & Harris 1993). Rates of father-child contact following divorce are also low, with national estimates indicating that about one-third of non-resident fathers have no contact with their children (Nord & Zill 1996).

### Father involvement

Evolving beyond a dichotomous absence/presence concept, father involvement has evolved into a multi-dimensional concept that examines fathers through a diverse and changing framework that accounts for familial, social, cultural, economic and institutional support (Lamb *et al.* 1985; Parke 1996; Pleck 1997). In the mid-1980s, researchers began to shift focus from father absence/presence concerns to issues associated with father-child relationships, paternal influences on child development and the impact of father involvement on children and families (Hawkins & Palkovitz 1999; Marsiglio & Cohan 2000). Through this shift, several models of father involvement emerged, with Lamb *et al.* (1985) three fold typology of engagement, accessibility and responsibility having enormous influence on the father involvement literature. In Lamb, Pleck and Levine's terms, engagement means fathers' hands-on activities, such as helping with homework; accessibility means fathers' physical availability and monitoring activities even when not directly engaged with the child; and responsibility means fathers' ownership over tasks and decisions related to childrearing. Studies have looked at the effects of father involvement across diverse family structures, children's age and demographic groups.

Despite its theoretical and seemingly practical significance, the evidence provides mixed findings.

Arditti & Keith (1993) found that the relationship between former spouses does not have any impact on fathers' involvement with their children. Others report that as mothers are the primary gatekeepers to the children, fathers maintain co-operative relationships with their former spouses to remain involved with their children (Doherty *et al.* 1998; Rettig & Leichtentritt 2001). Several researchers suggest that support from fathers' parents, extended family, friends and community members positively influence the involvement of fathers with their children (Glickman 2004; Fagan *et al.* 2007). Other research suggests that family and friends treat fathers harshly and encourage behaviours that negatively influence fathers' involvement with their children (Bunting & McAuley 2004). Given these mixed findings, and the minimal attention given to examining fathers within the context of social networks (Rettig *et al.* 1999), future research may benefit by integrating this perspective into studies of father involvement.

### Social networks

Little is known about married and non-resident fathers' social networks<sup>2</sup> and how they contribute to fathers' fulfilling or not fulfilling their responsibilities. Even less is known about non-resident fathers, who are often missing from large national studies and surveys (Reichman *et al.* 2001; Nelson 2004). Particularly salient to the study of non-resident men and fathers, changes in family relationships, households and networks can have detrimental effects for fathers, including parental conflict, social isolation, debilitating health and engagement in risky behaviours, each of which may have a negative effect on their well-being, relationship with their children and fulfilment of their parenting responsibilities (Ahrons & Miller 1993; Shapiro & Lambert 1999; Anderson *et al.* 2005; Degarmo *et al.* 2008).

Social networks provide individuals with emotional and instrumental support that help them meet their daily responsibilities and overcome challenging conditions (Lin & Ensel 1989). Comprised of intimate relationships and involvement with immediate and extended family members, informal networks consist of exchanges occurring between individuals and based on mutual reciprocity and assistance (Wills 1991). Comprised of involvement with organizations – education, employment, health care and social services, formal networks consist of exchanges occurring

between individuals and organizations driven by organizational protocol. To increase feelings of competence, personal worth and self-confidence, individuals tend to seek support from informal networks. When seeking support for problems that informal networks cannot solve, individuals tend to seek support from formal networks (Gottlieb 1983). Non-resident fathers who are coping with a combination of psychosocial, familial, social, cultural and economic hardships may be at an increased risk of not having or losing supportive resources and opportunities (Garbarino & Stoking 1980; Gaudin & Pollane 1983). However, findings from several studies suggest non-resident fathers benefit from emotional, instrumental and organizational support, including employment, education, vocational training, mentorship – role modelling, parenting classes, support groups and general legal assistance support (Leinonen *et al.* 2003; Kossak 2005; Weinmann *et al.* 2005; Buckelew *et al.* 2006).

While a majority of studies indicate that social networks are a protective factor for mothers' parenting behaviour (Taylor *et al.* 1993; Thompson 1995; Kotch *et al.* 1999), few studies lend support in distinguishing whether social networks are a protective factor for fathers' parenting behaviour. The current study examines the influence that social networks have on fathers' parenting behaviour. Specifically, this study examines if fathers' social networks positively influence their involvement with their children. Among the studies that have shown social networks as protective factors on parenting behaviour, the support received appears to have the greatest effect on individuals living under stressful and negative conditions (Cohen & Wills 1985; Cutrona 1996). By contributing information, resources, and access to opportunities to non-resident fathers coping with various stressors, social networks may assist and support these fathers in fulfilling their parental responsibilities of maintaining involvement with their children (Wills & Shinar 2000).

## METHODOLOGY

### Data

The data used in this study were taken from the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study (Fragile Families Study), a national study examining the consequences of non-marital childbearing in low-income families (Garfinkel *et al.* 2000; Reichman *et al.* 2001). Information gathered from respondents includes family characteristics, child well-being and fathering, mother-child relationship, father's relationship with

mother, current partner, demographics, father's family background and support, environment and programmes, health and health behaviour, religion, education and employment, and income. The final sample includes 2754 fathers of all ages who were not married or living with their children at the time of the survey and whose children range in age from birth to 2 years old.

## Measures

### *Dependent variable*

*Father involvement.* A father involvement scale was created to examine the engagement occurring between fathers and their children. For this variable, an eight-item scale was created that asked fathers how many days in a week they played peek-a-boo, sang songs or nursery rhymes, read stories, told stories, played indoors, visited relatives, showed physical affection, and supervised bedtime routines with their children. A score of 0 indicates 0 days in a week that fathers engaged with their children. Scores of 1–7 indicates the number of days in a week that fathers engaged with their children. Dummy variables were created to represent two categories of involvement: no involvement (a code of 0 from the original scale) and involvement (codes 1 through 7 from the original scale). The answers to the eight questions were combined into a global father involvement scale ranging from 0, indicating no involvement, to 8, indicating very high involvement. The scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.825.

### *Independent variables*

*Fathers' relationship with former spouse or partner.* This variable was used to measure non-resident fathers' relationship with their former spouse or partner. For this variable, one item was included that asked, 'In general, would you say that your relationship with [your child's mother] is excellent, very good, good, fair, or poor?' A score of 0 represents 'poor', and a score of 4 represents 'excellent'.

*Fathers' involvement with informal networks.* A father informal network involvement scale was created to examine support fathers received from family and friends. For this variable, a scale was created with six items asking fathers if they received: financial support from family and friends; a place to live from family and friends, and emergency child care from family

and friends. The six items were dichotomized, with zero indicating that fathers did not receive financial and social support from family and friends and one indicating that fathers did receive financial and social support from family and friends. Dummy variables were created to represent two categories of informal network involvement: no informal network involvement (a code of 0 from the original item) and informal network involvement (a code of 1 from the original item). The answers to the six items were combined into a global informal network involvement scale ranging from 0, indicating no father–informal network involvement, to 6, indicating very high father–informal network involvement. The scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.951.

*Fathers' involvement with formal networks.* A father formal network involvement scale was created to examine the support fathers received from human and social welfare organizations and programmes. For this variable, a scale was created with five items asking fathers if they received financial, employment, medical, and parental support from the employment office, public welfare office, or fatherhood programmes. The five items were dichotomized with 0 indicating that fathers did not receive support from human and social welfare organizations and programmes, and 1 indicating that fathers did receive support. Dummy variables were created to represent two categories of formal network involvement: no formal network involvement (a code of 0 from the original item) and formal network involvement (a code of 1 from the original item). The answers to the five items were combined into a global formal network involvement scale ranging from 0, indicating no father–formal network involvement, to 5, indicating very high father–formal network involvement. The scale has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.991.

### *Control variables*

*Fathers' social characteristics.* The social characteristic variables of this study include fathers' age, race and ethnicity, educational attainment, employment and income.

### *Analytic methods*

Linear regression analyses were performed with fathers' involvement with their children as the dependent variable and fathers' relationship with their

**Table 1** Correlation coefficients between control and independent variables and father involvement variable

Variable	Father–mother relationship	Informal network involvement	Formal network involvement	Father involvement
Age	0.06**	0.01	–0.04	–0.07***
Hispanic	0.06**	–0.01	0.01	–0.09***
White	0.08**	0.10**	–0.06**	0.05**
Black	–0.11**	–0.06**	0.02	0.05**
Education	0.03	0.13**	–0.17**	0.05**
Employment	0.03	0.11**	–0.11**	0.04
Income	0.11*	0.24**	–0.19**	0.07***
Father–mother relationship				0.21***
Informal network involvement				0.06**
Formal network involvement				0.01

\*\*\* $P \leq 0.01$ ; \*\* $P \leq 0.05$ .

former spouse or partner and involvement with informal and formal networks as the independent variables.

### Findings

#### *Demographic characteristics of the sample*

Participants of this study included fathers who reported that they were not married at the time of the survey. The sample size in each of the models varies because of different response rates to items used in the variables applied to the models. The age of the fathers ranged from 15 to 80 years of age with a mean age of 26.49. More than three-quarters of the fathers identified as Black and Hispanic. Forty per cent of fathers reported having an education level equivalent to or lower than a high school diploma. Eighty per cent of the fathers reported being employed. Forty-one per cent of the fathers reported having a household income level equivalent to or less than \$20 000 annually. Fathers reported maintaining good to very good relationships with their former spouse or partner ( $M = 2.55$ ,  $SD = 1.21$ ) on a 5-point scale. Fathers reported having moderate involvement with informal networks of family and friends ( $M = 4.24$ ,  $SD = 1.80$ ) on a 6-point scale. The respondents reported having minimal involvement with formal networks of human and social welfare organizations and programmes ( $M = 0.64$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) on a 5-point scale.

#### *Bivariate analyses*

The bivariate analyses for the variables included in this study are presented in Table 1. Pearson correlation coefficients were used to examine the relationship between the control variables (fathers' age, race and

ethnicity, education, employment and income), independent variables (fathers' relationship with former spouse or partner and involvement with informal and formal networks) and dependent variable (fathers' involvement with their children). The findings presented in Table 1 revealed a statistically significant relationship between the variables; however, the relationships are relatively weak. Fathers' age is negatively associated with father involvement ( $r = -0.07$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ). Fathers' race and ethnicity is mixed, with White ( $r = 0.05$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) and Black ( $r = 0.05$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ) fathers being positively associated with father involvement, and with Hispanic fathers being negatively associated with father involvement ( $r = -0.09$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ). Fathers' education is positively associated with father involvement ( $r = 0.05$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). Fathers' income is positively associated with father involvement ( $r = 0.07$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ). Fathers' relationship with their former spouse or partner is positively associated with father involvement ( $r = 0.21$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ). Father's involvement with informal networks is positively associated with father involvement ( $r = 0.09$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ). There is not a significant relationship between fathers' involvement with formal networks and father involvement.

#### *Multivariate analyses*

Five sets (models) of analyses were conducted with father involvement as the dependent variable – one set with the control variables only; one set with the control variables and the independent variable, fathers' relationship with former spouse or partner; one set with the control variables and the independent variable, fathers' involvement with informal networks; one set with the control variables and the independent

**Table 2** Father involvement: linear regression coefficients of five models (M)

Variable	M1 (n = 1467)		M2 (n = 1271)		M3 (n = 1467)		M4 (n = 1466)		M5 (n = 1270)	
	B	t	B	t	B	t	B	t	B	t
Age	-0.11	-0.07***	-0.08	-0.07***	-0.11	-0.07***	-0.10	-0.07***	-0.08	-0.07***
Hispanic	-0.42	-0.10*	0.05	0.02	-0.43	-0.10*	-0.41	-0.10*	0.03	0.01
White	0.03	0.01	0.08	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.04	0.01
Black	-0.04	-0.01	0.05	0.02	-0.05	-0.01	-0.03	-0.01	0.03	0.01
Education	0.03	0.01	0.13	0.08***	0.03	0.01	0.04	0.02	0.12	0.07**
Employment	0.25	0.05*	0.11	0.03	0.25	0.05*	0.27	0.05	0.10	0.03
Income	0.10	0.06**	-0.00	-0.00	0.10	0.06**	0.11	0.07**	-0.02	-0.02
Relationship†			0.28	0.23***					0.27	0.22***
Involvement‡										
Informal					0.04	0.03			0.07	0.09***
Formal							0.11	0.04	-0.02	-0.01
Constant										
R		0.14***		0.25***		0.14		0.14***		0.26***
R <sup>2</sup>		0.02		0.06		0.02		0.02		0.07

†Relationship = fathers' relationship with their former spouse or partner.

‡Involvement: Informal = fathers' involvement with informal networks of family and friends.

§Involvement: Formal = fathers' involvement with formal networks of organizations.

\*\*\* $P \leq 0.01$ ; \*\* $P \leq 0.05$ ; \* $P \leq 0.10$ .

variable, fathers' involvement with formal networks; and one set with the control variables and all of the independent variables. Table 2 presents the results of the analyses.

As shown in model one of Table 2, fathers' social characteristics are significantly related to their involvement with their children ( $F(7, 1460) = 4.13, P < 0.001$ ). Results revealed that fathers' age, employment and income status, and being of Hispanic origin are statistically significant to their involvement with their children. Fathers' employment and income status are positively related to father involvement. Fathers' age and being of Hispanic origin are negatively related to father involvement. There is no significant relationship between fathers' level of education and being White or Black and father involvement.

As shown in model two of Table 2, fathers' social characteristics and their relationship with their former spouse or partner are significantly related to involvement with their children ( $F(8, 1263) = 10.12, P < 0.001$ ). Results of this model revealed that fathers' age, level of education, and relationship with their former spouse or partner are statistically significant to their involvement with their children. Fathers' age is negatively related to father involvement. Fathers' level of education is positively related to father involvement. Fathers' relationship with their former spouse or partner is positively related to their involvement with their children ( $\beta = 0.28, P < 0.001$ ). There is no

significant relationship between fathers' race and ethnicity, employment, income status and father involvement.

As shown in model 3 of Table 2, fathers' social characteristics and involvement with informal networks are significantly related to involvement with their children ( $F(8, 1459) = 3.79, P < 0.001$ ). Results of this model revealed that fathers' age, employment and income status, and being of Hispanic origin are statistically significant to their involvement with their children. Fathers' employment and income status are both positively related to father involvement. Fathers' age and being of Hispanic origin are both negatively related to father involvement. There is no significant relationship between fathers' level of education and being White or Black and father involvement. There is no significant relationship between fathers' involvement with informal networks and father involvement. As shown in model four of Table 2, fathers' involvement with formal networks was not significant; however, fathers' age, income status and being of Hispanic origin are significantly related to their involvement with their children ( $F(8, 1458) = 3.83, P < 0.001$ ). Fathers' age and being of Hispanic origin are negatively related to father involvement. Fathers' income status is positively related to father involvement. There is no significant relationship between fathers' level of education, being White or Black, and father involvement.

As shown in model 5 of Table 2, fathers' social characteristics, relationship with their former spouse or partner, and involvement with informal networks are significantly related to their involvement with their children ( $F(10, 1260) = 9.05, P < 0.001$ ). Results of this model revealed that fathers' age, level of education, relationship with their former spouse or partner, and involvement with informal networks are statistically significant to their involvement with their children. Fathers' age is negatively related to father involvement. Fathers' level of education, relationship with their former spouse or partner ( $\beta = 0.33, P < 0.00$ ), and involvement with informal networks ( $\beta = 0.08, P < 0.10$ ) are positively related to father involvement. There is no significant relationship between fathers' race and ethnicity, employment and income status, involvement with formal networks, and father involvement.

## DISCUSSION

The multivariate findings revealed that fathers' social networks are significantly and positively related to their involvement with their children. Consistent with previous research, fathers' relationship with their former spouse or partner and involvement with informal networks, are significantly and positively related to fathers' involvement with their children. In light of the fact that mothers are often the primary caretaker after a divorce, separation or non-marital birth of a child, fathers may be more likely to maintain a fair to strong personal relationship with their former spouse or partner to ensure involvement with their children. Similarly, in times of change in familial relationships, parental roles and household composition, fathers may find their greatest emotional, financial and social support from family and friends. This support may reassure fathers that they are not alone in their parental responsibilities and may lend support to fathers maintaining involvement with their children. The father-child relationship is quite fragile and support from family and friends may be an essential component in fathers' involvement with their children.

Fathers' involvement with formal networks was not significant. Although the findings associated with fathers' involvement with formal networks and father involvement were not significant, analyses using individual items from the formal network global scale indicated that receiving support from fatherhood programmes was significantly and positively related to father involvement. We suggest that future research continue to examine the differential impact of support

and type of support from various sources on fathers' involvement with their children. Support from formal networks may help fathers in becoming more informed, knowledgeable, and skilled in assuming and developing their role as involved father.

The present study included a number of control variables that were expected to be related with fathers' involvement with their children. In several models, fathers' age and being of Hispanic origin was negatively related to father involvement. The finding associated with fathers' age was consistent with literature suggesting that age is related to emotional maturity (Rhein *et al.* 1997; Landale & Oropesa 2001). Fathers with less emotional maturity may be less likely to self-identify as fathers, thus, precluding them from fully understanding their roles and assuming their responsibilities as a father. The negative finding associated with Hispanic fathers may be related to cultural issues affecting the manner in which these fathers are involved with their children. While Hispanic fathers may be involved with their children, this may not occur in the form of playing peek-a-boo, singing songs or nursery rhymes, reading or telling stories, or playing indoors. Future research may wish to further examine father involvement by examining fathers' racial and ethnic origin. Relatively little research has been done in this area; however, Coltrane *et al.* (2004) suggest that Hispanic men were more likely than other men to engage and supervise their children in activities such as those previously mentioned. This association needs to be further examined.

Fathers' level of education, employment status and income status were significant and positively related to father involvement. These findings are consistent with previous literature, which shows a positive relationship between fathers' level of education (Ahmeduzzaman & Roopnarine 1992; Kalmijn, 1999; Johnson 2001; Fagan *et al.* 2007), employment and income status (Seltzer *et al.* 1998), and father involvement. In all likelihood, fathers' level of education, employment status and income status may be associated with the aforementioned emotional maturity of fathers. Fathers who achieve a certain level of education and maintain employment may be emotionally mature enough to assume the responsibilities associated with parenting. Furthermore, given a higher level of education and stable employment and income, fathers may have higher levels of human, social and cultural capital, all of which may contribute positively to men identifying as fathers, understanding their fathering roles, and assuming their fathering responsibilities.

The results of this study should be interpreted in the context of several limitations. First, the representativeness of the study is limited to those fathers who recently experienced the birth of a child in one of the 20 cities included in the national sample. The study does not account for fathers of children who are over 2 years old or fathers in communities (urban or rural) not included in the sample, therefore, generalization cannot be made to all non-resident fathers. Second, numerous studies question the validity of fathers' self-reports of involvement with their children and found that fathers tend to over-report their involvement (Furstenberg 1992; Sherwood 1992; Waller & Plotnick 2001; Hofferth *et al.* 2002). The present study did not include self-reports from mothers. Measuring both mothers' and fathers' self-reports of father involvement would be another way to measure father involvement. Lastly, the formal network scale included measures typically associated with single parents and their children, not fathers who do not reside with their children. Including measures such as non-resident fathers' involvement with fatherhood programmes, religious institutions and support groups may be a stronger measure of formal networks than the measure included in this study.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Given federal and state governments' interest in cultivating healthy families and responsible fathering, the results of the present study are relevant to social welfare policy and practice with non-resident fathers. Over the course of the last 20 years, policy-makers, social service agencies and family-support programmes have become increasingly aware of the familial, social, cultural and economic challenges experienced by a segment of non-resident fathers in the United States (History of National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families, Inc, 2003). During the past decade many new programmes have been developed for fathers (Bernard & Knitzer 1999). In fact, recent estimates indicate that 33 of 50 states have established formal responsible fatherhood commissions, initiatives and programmes serving fathers, mostly low income (National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families 2001). While an improvement from previous decades, these programmes have focused primarily on promoting marriage, on strengthening healthy marriages and on positive youth development. Few have implemented initiatives

intended to strengthen relationships between parents when marriage is not an option, and many do not utilize informal networks in cultivating responsible fathers.

As our data suggest, the degree to which fathers are involved with their former spouse or partner and informal networks is related to involvement with their children. Social service agencies and family support organizations should work with parents to address obstacles that interfere with fathers' involvement with their children. Given that considerable research has demonstrated father's influence on the development of children (King 1994; Lamb 1997; Harper & McLanahan 2004), it is suggested that those organizations serving families and children cultivate a system of care that encourages parents to maintain favourable relationships. Thus, agencies planning or offering parenting services should consider training and curriculum modalities that attend to the unique needs of non-marital parents. Our sense is that this is an area needing considerably more research.

Our findings also suggest that organizations serving non-marital families encourage fathers to utilize the support of family and friends to maintain involvement with their children. Given the stressors parents experience at or after dissolution of a marriage or relationship, evidence suggests that fathers may be more susceptible to environmental stressors (Abidin 1990; Fagan 2000), which ultimately affect their fathering behaviour and involvement with their children. By including fathers' informal networks in the supportive process, fathers may come to identify multiple resources available to them, which may help them in alleviating or eliminating the environmental stressors affecting their involvement with their children.

Social welfare initiatives pertaining to fathering have primarily grown out of economic, political and cultural agendas, with an emphasis on the former. Relatively little has been done in the social welfare policy and programmes arena that considers the relationship between non-marital parents and fathers' involvement with informal networks in the study of father involvement. The present study adds to the growing knowledge about father involvement. Future research should continue to address questions about the relationship between fathers' intra- and interdependent networks and father involvement. In a time of decreasing federal, state, and local funding and increasing challenges affecting diverse types of families and households, policy-makers and practitioners have an unprecedented opportunity to partner together to examine how fathers' intra- and

interdependent networks assist them in fulfilling their fathering responsibilities.

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## NOTES

1 This study employs the term ‘intra- and interdependent social networks’ to imply fathers’ relationships with their former spouse or partner and involvement with informal and formal networks/supports.

2 The terms ‘social networks’ and ‘social supports’ have been used interchangeably as social capital. This study employs the term ‘social networks’ to imply non-resident fathers’ social capital (i.e. intra- and interdependent networks).