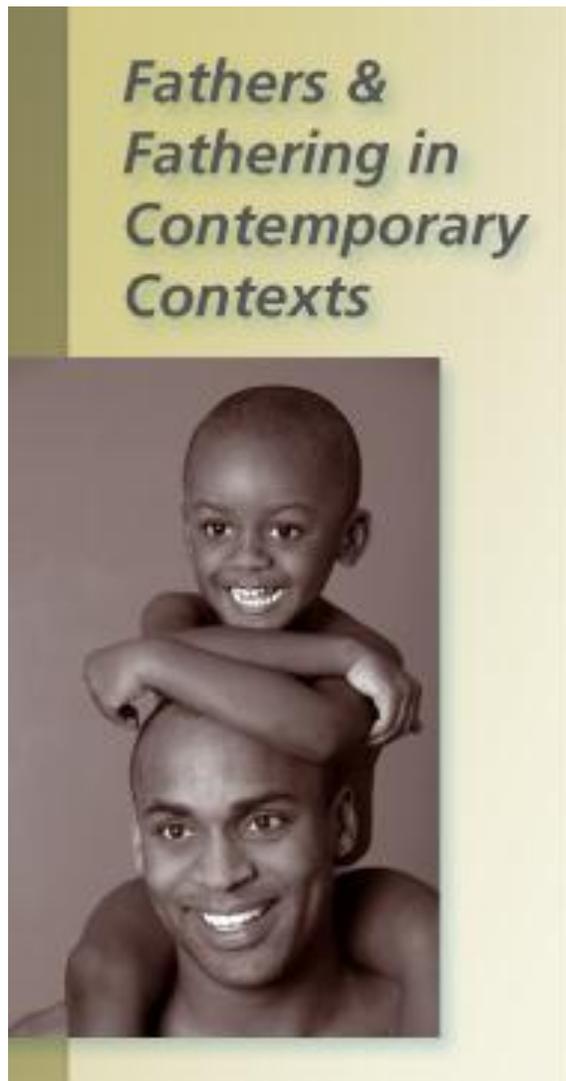


Fathers & Fathering in Contemporary Contexts

Executive Report

**May 23-24, 2012
National Institutes of Health
Bethesda, Maryland**



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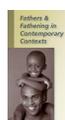
Fathers and Fathering in Contemporary Contexts
A National Conference Sponsored by the
National Center for Family & Marriage Research
May 23-24, 2012 on the NIH Campus, Bethesda, MD

Introduction

Fathers play a critical role in child development, and fathering behaviors are also linked to men's well-being. Additionally, father involvement has implications for mothering and maternal well-being as well as union quality and stability. The diversity characterizing today's fathers coupled with the heterogeneity in contemporary fathering behaviors make research on fathers and fathering particularly timely.

On May 23-24, 2012, more than 100 researchers and policymakers gathered at the National Institutes of Health to share the latest research on fathers and fathering in contemporary contexts and examine linkages with individual well-being. The conference also provided an opportunity to revisit topics that were addressed at the Conference of Fatherhood and Male Fertility in 1997. A panel of interdisciplinary researchers discussed cutting edge topics on fatherhood and fathering by sharing new theoretical, empirical, methodological, and measurement insights. Further, researchers addressed how their work informed current policy debates. Contemporary family life is more varied and less stable than in the past, and the uncertainty facing families today has been magnified by the economic downturn. In response, policy analysts and social scientists must keep pace with these shifts in the family landscape to decipher their consequences for health and well-being of America's children and families. This conference represented a notable step in that direction as summarized below.

I. Policy Panel [Panelists: Ronald Ashford, Demetra Nightingale, & Vicki Turetsky]



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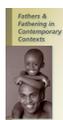


The policy panel addressed issues facing low-income, “at risk” fathers and current program developments that may enhance the capacity of these fathers to be involved with their children. Policymakers discussed three specific programs at length: public housing assistance, labor opportunities and training programs, and child support. Many of the barriers inhibiting “at risk” fathers’ involvement in programs spanned all three domains. For instance, incarceration can inhibit access to public housing, limit employment/training opportunities, and make it more difficult to provide child support. In light of recent budget cuts, policymakers are striving to coordinate programs across federal offices in order to pool grant monies. Further, evaluation officers noted that many programs are attempting to streamline data collection efforts to improve knowledge about fathers who are involved in programs, and how policy can meet their needs, allowing them to be better fathers to their children.

II. **Update and Overview** [Panelist: Jeffery Evans]

In 1997, more than 100 researchers, policy analysts, and public officials discussed findings and implications of work on disadvantaged fathers at the Conference on Fathering and Male Fertility. This conference resulted in multiple reports as well as the development of new theoretical frameworks and data collection efforts that have greatly improved our knowledge about fathers and fathering. In fact, most of the goals set forth by this conference have been met over the past 14 years. However, discussions at the 2012 conference demonstrated researchers and policymakers continue to grapple with understanding and collecting data on fathers and their effects on families in contemporary, complex social circumstances.

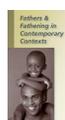
III. **Resident Fathers** [Panelists: William Marsiglio, Sandra Hofferth, Rebecca Ryan, & Susan Stewart]



Scholars described theoretical perspectives, current trends, and policy implications specifically related to resident fathers and their impacts on co-resident children. Two notable themes emerged from these presentations: (1) resident fathers have become increasingly involved in their children's lives and (2) the living arrangements of resident fathers have become increasingly complex (e.g., stepfamilies, cohabitation). In response to these themes, researchers must adapt both theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches to better understand resident fathers and their influences on co-resident children (e.g., considering co-residential step-parenting and quantity versus quality time spent with children).

IV. Nonresident Fathers [Panelists: Daniel Meyer, Valerie King, Kevin Roy, & Mindy Scott]

Research has demonstrated that nonresident fathers play an important role in the lives of their nonresident children. This body of work needs to account for the multiple ways that fathers can be involved in their children's lives (e.g., new technologies permit a wider range of contact). In addition, being an active nonresident father is positively related to non-resident children's and nonresident fathers' well-being. However, researchers have struggled to ascertain the mechanisms driving this relationship. When evaluating the effects of nonresident fatherhood, researchers must also consider the possibility of multiple relationships for the same father. For instance, consider the relationship children have with custodial mothers and resident step-fathers as well as the relationships between custodial mothers/resident step-fathers and nonresident fathers. Ultimately, current trends in families make nonresident fatherhood a more common but also more complex living arrangement among today's families. In response to these trends, researchers must consider factors such as the attachment of children to nonresident fathers, the contours of nonresident status (dynamic versus stable



separation), complex custody arrangements, and nonresident fathers' economic standing to better understand the effects of nonresident fathers and their level of involvement.

V. Co-Parenting [Panelists: Marcia Carlson, Jay Fagan, Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, & Mark Feinberg]

Research has linked effective co-parenting to positive child outcomes. Initially, the research in this area focused on co-parenting among either divorced or married parents. However, recent work has explored co-parenting in more diverse contexts such as nonmarital and adolescent childbearing. In addition, the co-parenting relationship is undoubtedly linked to maternal gatekeeping, which is central to understanding co-parenting across households. Ultimately, research has demonstrated that effective co-parenting can diminish the barriers to involvement that many “at risk” fathers face. To better understand co-parenting and its effects, researchers must conduct research on specific subpopulations (e.g., incarcerated fathers). Similarly, parenting programs should be designed to facilitate more effective co-parenting in addition to building relationship skills among parents.

VI. Father Involvement and Well-being [Panelists: Natasha Cabrera, Craig Garfield, Catherine Tamis-Lemonda, & Waldo Johnson]

Father involvement has been linked to children's well-being (having both long- and short-term and positive and negative effects), mothers' well-being (in the form of mother-child relationships and parenting), and fathers' well-being (both positive and negative life/health changes). This association has led scholars to ask why father involvement matters for well-being. Current research has identified both direct and indirect effects of father involvement. Moreover, father involvement has been found to have both independent and multiplicative effects on child outcomes when considered along with mother involvement. In response to



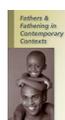
these findings, researchers must embrace broad definitions of fathers (biological and social) and examine the effects of father involvement across diverse family forms (e.g., nonmarital, nonresidential, and so forth) and socio-economic circumstances to better understand whether and how the relationship between father involvement and well-being differs across subgroups.

VII. Fathers in Diverse Contexts [Panelists: Christopher Wildeman, Kimberly Updegraff, Abbie Goldberg, & Rachel Farr]

One theme that has emerged throughout each session in this conference has been the importance of understanding fatherhood in a context of increasing diversity and family complexity. This session examined fatherhood and how it related to three specific contexts relevant for the U.S. today: mass incarceration, immigration, and same-sex couple parenting. Ultimately, this session demonstrated that each of these trends has important implications for fatherhood. For instance, researchers should consider the role mass incarceration has had on father absence particularly among disadvantaged populations. Further, researching diverse contexts provides researchers an opportunity to disentangle the effects of culture, gender, and fathering. Each of these presentations demonstrated the utility of considering fatherhood across and within diverse contexts. However, additional research is needed to assess fatherhood across other social contexts.

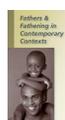
VIII. Future Directions [Panelists: Amanda Geller, Ryan King, Earl Johnson, Rosalind King, & William McLaughlin]

Taking stock of key developments in fatherhood research and initiatives over the last 14 years generated important questions about where we've come from and where we might be headed. Recent data efforts coupled with a growing body of research has provided much

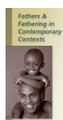


needed insight into fathers and the roles they play in families. Future research must expand conventional definitions of fatherhood and challenge simplistic assumptions about what defines a father. Increasing diversity, complexity, and technological advances (such as assisted reproductive technologies) call into question the simple biological definition and theoretical discussions of what defines a father. In addition, mixed methodological approaches could help to better describe and explain fathering in contemporary, diverse contexts. Now that research has established a richer, more nuanced understanding of fatherhood, an important next step is to apply what has been learned to programs and policies to cultivate actively engaged fathers and thus improve children's, mothers', and fathers' well-being. Research and practice are too often disconnected, with scholars and policymakers isolated from one another, which is only likely to hinder the effectiveness of programs. For programs to work, we must be clear about whom these programs are targeting, how birth mothers and other family members influence father involvement, and how social contexts likely influence program effectiveness.

The research community has made significant progress in understanding fathers and fathering, especially through the pursuit of interdisciplinary approaches, a focus on the meaning of fatherhood, and attention to men's fertility related behavior. Research is also more carefully considering family processes and specific contexts that shape children's well-being. Nonetheless, many of the recommendations made 14 years ago still resonate in the contemporary environment. For instance, there remains a need for better integration of research and policy. Both groups would benefit from conceptualizing fathering as a process rather than simply a legal status. Concerns remain about data collection efforts, namely the importance of ensuring ample sample sizes to focus on specific subgroups, capturing transitions



into and out of relationships, and assessing data quality. There continues to be interest in novel methodological approaches that might include physiological characteristics, qualitative data, time diaries, new modes of data collection, longitudinal data, father supplements, and integration of evaluation data. New investments in innovative data collection and analyses will move the field forward and provide new insight into the well-being of fathers, mothers, and children.



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