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Responsible Fathering:

An Overview and Conceptual Framework

This article defines responsible fathering, sum-marizes the relevant research, and presents a sys-temic, ecological framework to organize research and programmatic work in this area. A principal finding is that fathering is influenced, even more than mothering, by contextual factors in the family and community.

For more than a century, American society has engaged in a sometimes contentious debate about what it means to be a responsible parent. Whereas most of the cultural debate about mothers has fo-cused on what, if anything, mothers should do outside the family, the debate about fathers has focused on what fathers should do inside the fam-ily. What role should fathers play in the everyday lives of their children, beyond the traditional breadwinner role? How much should they emu-late the traditional nurturing activities of mothers, and how much should they represent a masculine role model to their children? Is fatherhood in a unique crisis in late twentieth century America (Blankenhorn, 1995; Doherty, 1997; Griswold, 1993; LaRossa, 1997; Popenoe, 1996)?

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The recent upsurge of interest in fathering has generated concern among supporters of women's and mothers' rights that the emphasis on the impor-tant role of fathers in families may feed longstand-ing biases against female-headed single-parent fam-ilies, that services for fathers might be increased at the expense of services for single mothers, and that the profatherhood discourse might be used by the fathers' rights groups who are challenging custody, child support, and visitation arrangements after di-vorce. On the other hand, feminist psychologists have recently argued for more emphasis on father-ing and have suggested that involved, nurturing fa-thers will benefit women as well as children (Phares, 1996; Silverstein, 1996). Only an ecologi-cally sensitive approach to parenting, which views the welfare of fathers, mothers, and children as in-tertwined and interdependent, can avoid a zero-sum approach to parenting in which fathers' gains be-come mothers' losses.

These cultural debates serve as a backdrop to the social science research on fathering because researchers are inevitably influenced by the cul-tural context within which they work (Doherty, Boss, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz, 1993). In their recent reanalysis of the historical trends of American ideals of fatherhood, Pleck and Pleck (1997) see the emerging ideal of fatherhood in the late twentieth century as father as equal coparent. (From 1900 to 1970, the dominant cultural ideal was the genial dad and sex role model, and from 1830 to 1900, the distant breadwinner.) Research on fathering, then, has attained prominence in the

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social sciences during an era of historically high
expectations of men's involvement in the every-
day lives of their children. Not surprisingly, a
good deal of that research has compared levels of
fathers' involvement with mothers' involvement
because mothers have become the benchmark for
norms for fathering (Day & Mackey, 1989).

This post-1970s interest in fathering has been
fueled by the reappraisal of family roles for
women and by unprecedented demographic
changes in the American family. In other words,
scholarly, professional, and public policy interest
in fathering has crystallized during the time that
the foundation of traditional fathering—the physi-
cally present father who serves as the unique fam-
ily breadwinner—has been eroding rapidly. With
more than half of mothers in the work force, with
new marriages breaking up at a rate of 50%, and
with nearly one third of births to single women,
the landscape of fathering has been altered sub-
stantially (Bumpass, 1990; U.S. Bureau of the
Census, 1994a).

Sociological and historical work on fathering
makes it clear that fathering (at least beyond in-
semination) is fundamentally a social construction.
Each generation molds its cultural ideal of fathers
according to its own time and conditions, and
each deals with the inevitable gap between what
LaRossa (1988) terms the "culture" of fatherhood
and the "conduct" of fathers in families. Sociolog-
ical and historical analyses also make it clear that
fathering cannot be defined in isolation from
mothering, mothers' expectations, and social ex-
pectations about childrearing in the society, and
that these social expectations have been fairly
fluid in the United States in the twentieth century.
LaRossa (1997) has demonstrated how the culture
of fatherhood and the conduct of fathers change
from decade to decade as social and political con-
ditions change.

In addition to this historical and social con-
structivist perspective, fathering also lends itself to
a systemic framework, which views fathering not
primarily as a characteristic or behavioral set of
individual men or even as a dyadic characteristic
of a father-child relationship, but as a multilateral
process involving fathers, mothers, children, ex-
tended family, and the broader community and its
cultures and institutions. Fathering is a product of
the meanings, beliefs, motivations, attitudes, and
behaviors of all these stakeholders in the lives of
children. Indeed, this article will suggest that fa-
thering may be more sensitive than mothering to
contextual forces, forces that currently create

more obstacles than bridges for fathers but that
potentially could be turned in a more supportive
direction.

With these historical, social constructionist,
and systemic perspectives as a backdrop, we ex-
amine the concept of responsible fathering, sum-
marize findings from the major areas of research
on responsible fathering, and offer a conceptual
framework to guide future research and program
development. Because of the vastness of the liter-
ature on fathering and the presence of a number
of recent reviews, the review of the literature in
this report is selective rather than comprehensive.
It focuses on major recent work and points out
continuing gaps, such as cultural issues in father-
ing. In some areas, we rely almost entirely on re-
cent reviews by other scholars such as Pleck
(1997). Our goal is one of synthesis and theory
development rather than comprehensive docu-
mentation.

RESPONSIBLE FATHERING

The use of the term "responsible fathering,"
which was the original language used by the U.S.
Department of Health and Human Services in
commissioning our work, reflects a recent shift by
academics and professionals away from value-
free language and toward a more explicit value-
advocacy approach. "Responsible" suggests an
"ought," a set of desired norms for evaluating fa-
thers' behavior. The term also conveys a moral
meaning (right and wrong) because it suggests
that some fathering could be judged "irresponsi-
ble." The willingness to use explicitly moral terms
reflects a change in the social climate among aca-
demics, professionals, and policymakers, who
until recently embraced the traditional notion that
social science, social policy, and social programs
could be value free. In the late twentieth century,
there is more appreciation of the inevitability of
value-laden and moral positions being part of so-
cial science and social interventions and a greater
willingness to be explicit about values so that they
can be debated openly and their influence on social
science and policy can be made clear, rather than
being covert (Doherty, 1995a; Doherty et al., 1993;
Wolfe, 1989). Indeed, there has always been a
strong but implicit undercurrent of value advocacy
in fathering research, much of it conducted by
men and women interested in promoting more
committed and nurturing involvement by men in
their children's lives. Similarly, there has always
been a moral undertone to the focus on fathers'

deficits that has characterized much of the literature on absent, "deadbeat," and emotionally uninvolved fathers (Doherty, 1990). The term "responsible fathering," as we use it, applies to fathers across all social classes and racial groups, not narrowly to men in lower social classes or minority groups. Now that value advocacy has become more explicit in the fathering area (Dollahite, Hawkins, & Brotherson, 1997), responsible fathering needs to be clearly defined. James Levine and Edward Pitt (1995) have made an important start in their delineation of responsible fathering. They write:

> A man who behaves responsibly towards his child does the following:
>
> • He waits to make a baby until he is prepared emotionally and financially to support his child.
>
> • He establishes his legal paternity if and when he does make a baby.
>
> • He actively shares with the child's mother in the continuing emotional and physical care of their child, from pregnancy onwards.
>
> • He shares with the child's mother in the continuing financial support of their child, from pregnancy onwards. (pp. 5–6)

Levine and Pitt's elements of responsible fathering have the advantage of referring to both resident and nonresident fathers, a reflection of the diversity of fathers' situations. The authors also assert that commitment to this ethic of responsible fatherhood extends beyond the father to the mother, to professionals who work with families, and to social institutions entrusted with the support of families. We employ Levine and Pitt's definition in this article, but we narrow our scope to men who are already fathers; we do not address the issue of postponing fatherhood.

The developmental backdrop for the discussion of fathering reflects children's needs for predictability, nurturance, and appropriate limit setting from fathers and mothers, as well as for economic security and a cooperative, preferably loving relationship between their parents (Hetherington & Parke, 1993). Furthermore, the specific needs of children vary by their developmental stage. Parents are required to provide higher levels of physical caregiving when their children are infants and greater levels of conflict management when their children become adolescents. Although we do not review the literature on the effects of active fathering on children, an assumption behind this arti-

cle—and our value stance—is that children need and deserve active, involved fathers throughout their childhood and adolescence. The prime justification for promoting responsible fathering is the needs of children.

RESEARCH ON RESPONSIBLE FATHERING

The major areas of research on responsible fathering reflect the domains outlined by Levine and Pitt (1995), with the addition of attention to whether the father resides with the child. These domains can be categorized as (a) establishing legal paternity, (b) nonresidential fathers' presence versus absence, (c) nonresidential fathers' economic support for their children, and (d) residential fathers' level of involvement with their children. There are not many theoretical models or research studies that cross over between residential and nonresidential fathers. Offering such a model is one of the goals of this article. The review of literature, however, will be organized by the four research traditions delineated above. In order to delimit the review, we focus on heterosexual, biological fathers and not gay fathers, stepfathers, adoptive fathers, or father surrogates—groups deserving considerably more research and programmatic attention.

Fathers and Legal Paternity

Declaring legal paternity is the sine qua non of responsible fathering. With legal paternity comes a variety of economic, social, and psychological benefits to the child and some degree of protection of the father's rights. Tangible benefits for the child include health care if the father is employed, social security, mandated child support, and armed forces benefits if the father is in the military. They also include the intangible benefit of knowing one's biological heritage and having a clearer sense of social identity (Wattenberg, 1993).

Unfortunately, only about one third of nonmarital births in the U.S. are followed by paternity adjudication (Adams, Landsbergen, & Hecht, 1994). There is limited research on the reasons, but they appear to involve lack of information about the benefits of legal paternity, the dynamics of the couple relationship, opposition from mothers, cultural issues, social policy barriers, and low priority actions on the part of social institutions (Anderson, 1993; Wattenberg, 1993). In a study of new, unmarried parents, Wattenberg documented the faulty and incomplete information the young couples had. Nor were they informed by health

personnel or social service personnel, who themselves had major gaps in their knowledge about the advantages of paternity determination. What's more, current institutional practices encourage unmarried fathers in welfare families to remain "underground" because the state generally keeps a substantial portion of the child support the father pays. If he does not declare paternity, any informal, under-the-table payments he makes go directly to the mother and child (Achatz & MacAllum, 1994).

Anderson (1993) and Wattenberg (1993) also have explored the ambivalence of the mother and father themselves about establishing paternity. Young fathers sometimes feel tricked and trapped by the mother, and the mother may feel both protective of the father (not wanting him to be harassed by authorities) and reluctant to tie herself to him in the future. Extended family on both sides may have mixed feelings about legal paternity and father involvement. Social service personnel, too, have been found to have the same ambivalence and reluctance to encourage the mother and father to establish paternity. Recently, however, federally mandated reforms have required states to implement programs to promote the acknowledgment of paternity. The results thus far have been mixed: Rates of paternity establishment have increased, but paternity is still unacknowledged in the majority of cases for reasons cited in prior studies (Sorenson & Turner, 1996).

The available research on the process of establishing legal paternity supports an ecological model that emphasizes how contextual forces in the community combine with mother-father relationship factors and individual father factors to create a situation where too many fathers stumble on the first step of responsible fathering.

Father Presence Versus Absence

After the declaration of paternity, the bedrock of fathering is presence in the child's life. The two major structural threats to fathers' presence are nonmarital childbearing and divorce. In 1993, 6.3 million children (9% of all children) were living with a single parent who had never married, up from 243,000 in 1960 (.4% of all children). In terms of percentages of all births, nonmarital births have risen from 4% of births in 1940 to 31% in 1993; the biggest increases occurred in the 1970s and 1980s. The nonmarital birth rate for women over age 20 has increased substantially since the late 1970s. For teenagers, although the

overall birth rate has actually remained steady for decades, the decision to not marry has led to a dramatic increase in the nonmarital birth rate (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1995).

In nearly all cases, children born outside of marriage reside with their mothers. If fathers do not live with the mother and child, their presence in the child's life is frequently marginal and, even when active for a while, tends to be fragile over time. Until recently, studies in this area have been hampered by small, nonrepresentative samples. Lerman (1993), using data from a nationally representative group of over 600 unwed fathers, found that about three fourths of young fathers who did not reside with their children at birth never lived in the same household with them. About 50% of these fathers visited their child once a week, but about 20% never visited or visited once a year. The pattern over time was toward less contact as the children got older. There were racial differences in these findings, however. African American unmarried fathers were more likely to live close to their children and see them more frequently than were White and Hispanic fathers. The figures for fathers who rarely or never visited their children were as follows: African American (12%), Hispanic (30%), and White (37%). African American unmarried fathers also had a slightly higher frequency of support payments.

A number of qualitative studies have documented how mothers and grandmothers serve as gatekeepers for the father's presence in the child's life and how institutional practices create barriers, particularly for young fathers (Allen & Doherty, 1996; Wattenberg, 1993). Many of these fathers relinquish involvement, and many who try to stay involved face structural and relationship barriers.

Overall, there appears to be a strong negative effect of nonmarital fathering on the father-child bond. Furstenberg and Harris (1993), reporting on their 20-year follow-up of new unmarried African American parents in Baltimore (a group who were generally representative of African American unmarried parents nationally), found that only 13% of the young adults reported a strong bond with their biological father if he had not lived with them. The figure was 50% for fathers who lived with the child. These investigators also examined bonds with stepfathers and other male figures in the child's life. Here, too, the findings were sobering: "Taking all these father figures into account, just 1% of the children had a strong relationship with two or more fathers, 30% reported a strong tie with at least one, and 69% had no father figure to

whom they were highly attached" (p. 126). Note that this study focused on the quality of father-child bonds among young adult children, not the frequency of contact.

In more than 25% of nonmarital births, the parents are cohabiting (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1995). In these cases, fathers are far more present in their children's lives. However, studies indicate that cohabiting couples have high breakup rates, and those who go on to marry have higher divorce rates (Bumpass, Sweet, & Cherlin, 1991; DeMaris & Rao, 1992). Therefore, even when the father lives with the mother of the child, his ongoing presence in the child's life is often fragile.

Although the number of nonmarital births has been increasing, an even greater number of children (6.6 million) live with a single parent subsequent to divorce (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994b). In about 90% of cases, these children reside with their mothers. Research has documented a declining presence of noncustodial fathers over the years after a divorce. One national study of school-aged children found that 2 years after a divorce about half had not seen their father for a year (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985). A more recent study, using 1990 data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation, reported that about one third of divorced fathers did not spend time with their children in the previous year (Nord & Zill, 1996). In general, although father involvement after divorce seems to be increasing and some fathers are quite involved with their children after a divorce, the predominant pattern among noncustodial fathers is one of gradual withdrawal from their children's lives (Amato & Rezac, 1994; Seltzer, 1991).

The sequelae of divorce for the quality of father-child relations is also quite sobering. Zill, Morrison, and Coiro (1993) followed a large national sample of children and parents through the young adulthood of the children. After adjusting for a variety of demographic factors and vocabulary test scores, they found increasing alienation of divorced fathers from their children, measured by the children's descriptions of these relationships. Among 18- to 22-year-olds, 65% of those whose parents had divorced reported a poor relationship with their father, compared with 29% of those whose parents had not divorced. The data also showed poorer relationships with mothers after divorce, but the effect for fathers was stronger. Remarriage of one of the parents made things worse: 70% of children of divorce and remarriage reported a poor relationship with their father.

Much of the research on fathers' involvement with their children after divorce has focused on children's well-being. Although some studies have found that higher levels of father involvement were associated with greater psychological adjustment among children, other studies, especially those with nationally representative samples, have failed to support that conclusion (Furstenberg, Morgan, & Allison, 1987; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, Nastasi, & Lightel, 1986; Kalter, Kloner, Schreier, & Okla, 1989). A number of scholars who reported no effects for father involvement suggested that, although contact with both parents is desirable in principle, the benefits of father involvement for the child may be neutralized when there is significant conflict between parents. That is, when there is a good deal of interparental conflict, higher contact with the father might create additional strains on the child, strains that offset the advantages of seeing the father more frequently (Hetherington et al., 1982).

Amato and Rezac (1994) tested this hypothesis directly with data from the National Survey of Families and Households. They found that higher levels of involvement by the nonresidential parent (mostly fathers), measured by frequency of contacts, were associated with less problem behavior in children only in the presence of low interparental conflict. In other words, when the parents got along well, frequent contact of fathers with their children had positive behavioral outcomes for the children. When the parents had more serious conflict, however, high contact between father and child was associated with worse behavioral outcomes. This finding, which was statistically significant for boys but fell short of significance for girls, supports the importance of a systemic and ecological model for fathering, rather than a dyadic model that focuses only on the father-child relationship. Recent analyses of national data by Nord and Zill (1996) also shed light on the complexities of involvement of nonresidential fathers. They found that joint custody and voluntary visitation agreements were associated with better health among adolescents than were sole custody and court-ordered agreements. Generally, although more contact with the nonresident father was associated with better reports of health, the status of the parents' divorce agreements was an important moderating factor.

Overall, it appears that there are many barriers to the father's presence in a child's life outside of a marital context. Residential status alone, of

course, cannot account for this situation. Although there is a dearth of studies in this area, noncustodial mothers appear to do a better job of maintaining presence in their children's lives. For instance, more noncustodial mothers than fathers live in the same state as their children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995) and have more contact with their children than noncustodial fathers do (Amato & Rezac, 1994). It appears that there are personal, relational, cultural, and institutional barriers specific to fathering that inhibit fathers' presence in the lives of children with whom they do not live.

Fathers' Payment of Child Support

For many policy specialists, the principal concern with fathering outside of marriage lies with the payment of child support. The term "deadbeat dad" was coined to communicate moral indignation at the number of fathers who do not contribute to their children's economic well-being after a divorce. The research data are clear and consistent on the subject. According to a report on child support by the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1995), only 48% of the mothers who are awarded child support by the courts receive the full amount due. The remainder are divided more or less equally between those who receive partial payment and those who received nothing. Furthermore, other research has found that the amounts awarded and paid are not adequate to support a child, given mothers' often low incomes, even if the full amounts are forthcoming (Rettig, Christensen, & Dahl, 1991).

This economic struggle is even more common for nonmarital childbearing than for postdivorce situations, especially when fathers have lost contact with their children (Lerman, 1993). In 1993, 38% of children living with divorced mothers, but 66% of those living with never-married mothers, were living below the poverty line, compared with 11% of children living in two-parent families (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1994b). Only 27% of never-married custodial mothers have a child support award (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). Because many children born to never-married parents have not had legal paternity established, the prospects of establishing awards for these children are limited.

Researchers have examined factors in the non-payment of child support by fathers. One important predictor is having joint custody or visitation privileges or both. Fathers with these arrangements pay all or part of child support more often than

those who do not (79% vs. 56%; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). When asked about their lack of economic support, many fathers point to resentment toward mothers for misusing the funds and for withholding the children from the father (Furstenberg, Sherwood, & Sullivan, 1992; Kurdek, 1986). Indeed, studies have documented that more frequent contact is associated with more child support (Seltzer, 1991). Similarly, a tug-of-war over visitation and other contacts with children is associated with lower child support payments (Dudley, 1991; Seltzer, Schaeffer, & Charng, 1989).

Researchers and policymakers have tended to assume that the failure of noncustodial parents to provide economic support is primarily a problem specific to fathers. Without studies of noncustodial mothers' child support, many assumed that noncustodial mothers would be better payers of child support in the same way that they maintain more contact with their nonresidential children. This appears not to be the case. The most recent U.S. Bureau of the Census (1995) report on child support offered the first national data on child support payments by noncustodial mothers, as well as fathers. The findings showed that noncustodial mothers, like noncustodial fathers, do not pay all the child support that is owed. Custodial fathers receive about 53% of the child support owed, and custodial mothers receive about 68%. Slightly more than half of the noncustodial fathers (52%) and less than half of the noncustodial mothers (43%) pay all of what they owe. Mothers' nonpayment cannot be dismissed as stemming from their incomes being lower than the incomes of fathers because child support awards by the court are calibrated partly according to income.

These findings of nonsupport by noncustodial mothers suggest that there is something in the structure of nonresidential parenting, rather than in the culture of fatherhood, that is the principal inhibitor of economic support for children outside of marriage. Structural aspects of nonresidential parenting that may inhibit economic support might include having to send funds to an ex-spouse or to an ex-partner, having to provide economic support in the absence of day-to-day contact with one's children, and having no influence over how child support funds are spent. Because there are far more noncustodial fathers than noncustodial mothers, the greater social and policy problem is the lack of paternal support. But the solutions should reflect the possibility that there are inherent difficulties in paying money to an ex-spouse

or to an ex-partner when a parent does not live with, and thus does not have daily contact with, his or her children.

Residential Father Involvement with Children

A striking aspect of research on father involvement with the residential children is its emphasis not on the traditional responsibility of the father for economic support, but on the father's face-to-face interaction with his child in the family setting. However, it is clear that the quality of fathers' interactions with their children is tied to the father's success, real or perceived, as a breadwinner. The classic studies documenting this phenomenon are reports by Glen Elder and colleagues on how unemployment during the Great Depression affected the quality of father-child relations for men who became unemployed or who perceived themselves as less than adequate providers. These men increased the quantity of time with their children but showed decreased parenting quality through more arbitrariness and rejecting behaviors. Elder and colleagues found that the impact of unemployment on fathering was greater than on mothering, a finding replicated by other studies as well (Elder, Liker, & Cross, 1984; Elder, Van Nguyen, & Caspi, 1985; McLoyd, 1989). Studies with more recent cohorts of fathers have shown the same results and have emphasized that the father's perception of his financial situation, even more than his actual situation, influenced his fathering behavior (Harold-Goldsmith, Radin, & Eccles, 1988; LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993).

It appears that feeling like a failure in the breadwinning role is associated with demoralization for fathers, which causes their relationships with their children to deteriorate (McLoyd, 1989). This phenomenon has particular relevance for African American fathers and other fathers of color, who often face serious barriers to success in the provider role, with deleterious consequences for the ability to father (McLoyd, 1990; Taylor, Leashore, & Toliver, 1988). At a conceptual level, this connection between fathering and breadwinning demonstrates the importance of taking an ecological approach to fathering (Allen & Connor, 1997).

As for research on the kinds of father involvement inside the home, early studies on father-child interactions were dispersed into a variety of content categories such as warmth, control, sex role modeling, playfulness, and independence training. Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine (1985) then introduced the content-free dimensions of paternal engagement (direct caregiving, leisure, or play), paternal accessibility (availability to the child), and paternal responsibility (knowing what the child needs and making decisions about how to respond). Subsequently, research began to focus on the extent of paternal involvement in these three domains (especially the first two, because responsibility proved hard to operationalize). In addition to examining fathers' absolute levels of involvement with their children, researchers also concerned themselves with measuring the proportion of the father's involvement to the mother's involvement and assessing the predictors and child outcomes of different levels of paternal involvement with children of different ages.

Lamb and Pleck also introduced an often used model of the determinants of father involvement: motivation, skills, social support, and institutional practices (Lamb, 1987a; Lamb et al., 1985). They proposed that optimal father involvement will be forthcoming when these four factors are present—that is, when a father is highly motivated, has adequate parenting skills, receives social support for his parenting, and is not undermined by work and other institutional settings.

Recently, the literature on residential father involvement has been comprehensively reviewed and analyzed by Pleck (1997) for the third edition of Lamb's classic book, *The Role of the Father in Child Development.* The following summary relies heavily on Pleck's review.

Pleck's (1997) summary of studies during the 1980s and 1990s indicates that fathers' engagement (in proportion to mothers) is currently somewhat over 40%, and their accessibility is nearly two thirds that of mothers. (This indicates a level of engagement that is less than half of mothers' level; 100% means a level of involvement equal to mothers.) These figures are higher than those found in studies during the 1970s and early 1980s—by about one third for engagement and one half for accessibility.

As for absolute levels of engagement and accessibility (distinguished from the proportion of mother's involvement), Pleck (1997) reports that the age of the child and the day of the week were important factors in the available studies. For example, McBride and Mills (1993), using a guided interview to determine time of activities, found that paternal engagement with young children was from 2.0 to 2.8 hours per day, with 1.9 hours on weekdays and 6.5 hours on weekends. According

to Pleck's review, hours with adolescents tend to be lower. U.S. studies show a range from .5 to 1.0 hour on weekdays and from 1.4 to 2.0 hours on Sundays. Fathers spent more time with sons than with daughters. Accessibility estimates are higher across a number of studies, ranging from 2.8 to 4.9 hours per day with younger children and 2.8 hours per day with adolescents (Pleck, 1997). Pleck notes that these well-documented amounts of time are markedly different than the figure of 12 minutes per day that is often cited in the media.

The best data on paternal accessibility are derived from federal surveys of child-care arrangements of employed mothers. These studies indicate that fathers are a significant source of primary child care when mothers are working outside the home. Fathers are as common a source as child-care centers and family day care homes. Twenty-three percent of families with a working mother have a father who serves as the primary parent while the mother works. These figures are up substantially from the 1970s, although recent findings indicate that fathers' involvement as primary caregivers changes in response to the larger U.S. economy and the availability of jobs (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996).

Overall, Pleck (1997) concludes that, in keeping with the shift toward a cultural ideal of the highly involved, coequal parent, there is evidence of the increasing engagement, accessibility, and responsibility of fathers in the lives of their children over the past 20 years. However, there remains a large gap between fathers' levels of involvement and mothers' levels. Research on child and sociodemographic predictors of residential fathers' involvement may be summarized from Pleck's review as follows: Fathers tend to be more involved with their sons than their daughters, particularly with older children. Fathers are less involved with older children than younger children, although the decline of fathers' involvement as children get older is proportionately less than the decline in mothers' involvement. Fathers with larger numbers of children are more involved, although the research in this area is somewhat mixed. Fathers are more involved with firstborn than later-born children and with infants born prematurely and who have difficult temperaments; these trends are true for mothers as well. Fathers' socioeconomic characteristics and race and ethnicity have not been found consistently related to their involvement with their children.

Theory and research on residential fathers' involvement with their children have not explicitly used the framework of responsible fathering, although this value-advocacy position comes through in the literature. Indeed, engagement, accessibility, and responsibility are ways to operationalize Levine and Pitt's (1995) notion of responsible fathering as involving "continuing emotional and physical care of their child" (p. 5). Unresolved is the issue of the utility of comparisons between mothers' and fathers' levels of involvement with children. In much of the literature on fathers, the behavior of mothers is the benchmark for evaluation (Levine, 1993). This leads to what feminist psychologist Vicky Phares (1996) termed a "matricentric" approach to parenting research, family therapy, and parent education, in which mothers are considered the standard parent and fathers are either ignored or studied for how they differ from mothers or how they neglect or abandon children. What is needed is a systemic, ecological approach to parenting in which the behaviors and beliefs of children, fathers, and mothers are viewed within an interdependent web of personal, relational, and community influences (Bateson, 1972; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Park, 1996).

INFLUENCES ON FATHERING: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The fathering literature has been long on empirical studies and short on theory. Researchers mostly have adapted concepts from social sciences to fit their particular area, but work is beginning on overarching conceptual frameworks to guide research and program development. In his review of theory in fathering research, Marsiglio (1995) mentions life course theory (which emphasizes how men's experience of fatherhood changes with life transitions), social scripting theory (which emphasizes the cultural messages that fathers internalize about their role), and social identity theory (which focuses on how men take on the identity of a father in relation to their other social roles). Hawkins, Christiansen, Sargent, and Hill (1995), Hawkins and Dollahite (1997), and Snarey (1993) have used Erik Erikson's developmental theory in their work on how fathering can promote generativity among adult men. Other scholars have explored the utility of economic theories to understand fathers' decisions to invest in, or withdraw from, their children (Becker, 1991).

The most specific conceptual model frequently used in the fatherhood literature is Lamb's and Pleck's four-factor model of father involvement,

which is not explicitly grounded in a broader theory such as Erikson's theory or social identity theory. (See Lamb et al., 1985.) Lamb and Pleck proposed that father involvement is determined by motivation, skills and self-confidence, social support, and institutional practices. These factors may be viewed as additive, building on one another, and as interactive, with some factors being necessary prior to others. For example, motivation may be necessary for the development of skills. Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, and Buehler (1995) proposed an eight-factor model of mediators between father identity and actual involvement after divorce: mother's preferences and beliefs, father's perception of mother's parenting, father's emotional stability, mother's emotional stability, sex of child, coparental relationship, father's economic well-being, father's economic security, and encouragement from others. Recently, Park (1996) articulated a systems model of residential father involvement that includes individual, family, extrafamilial, and cultural influences.

Based on the research literature, prior theoretical work on fathering, and the systemic ecological orientation described earlier, we present a conceptual model of influences on responsible fathering. (See Figure 1.) Unlike prior work, the model is intended to include fathering inside or outside marriage and regardless of coresidence with the child. The focus is on the factors that help create and maintain a father-child bond. The model attempts to transcend the dyadic focus of much traditional child development theory by emphasizing first the child-father-mother triad and then larger systems' influences.

The model highlights individual factors of the father, mother, and child; mother-father relationship factors; and larger contextual factors in the environment. Within each of these domains, the model outlines a number of specific factors that can be supported by the research literature. The center of the model is the interacting unit of child, father, and mother, each formulating meanings and enacting behaviors that influence the others. The three are embedded in a broader social context that affects them as individuals and affects the quality of their relationships.

We are particularly interested in highlighting factors that pertain to fathers because one of the goals of this article is to guide father-specific research, program development, and public policy. All of the factors in the model affect the mother-child relationship, as well, because they are generic to parenting (see Belsky, 1984), but many of them have particular twists for fathers. Because theory and research on parenting so often have been derived from work on mothers, it seems particularly important to illuminate the distinctive influences on fathering. The arrows point to the father-child relationship, in particular to the four domains of responsible fathering covered in this review—paternity, presence, economic support, and involvement.

FIGURE 1. INFLUENCES ON RESPONSIBLE FATHERING: A CONCEPTUAL MODEL
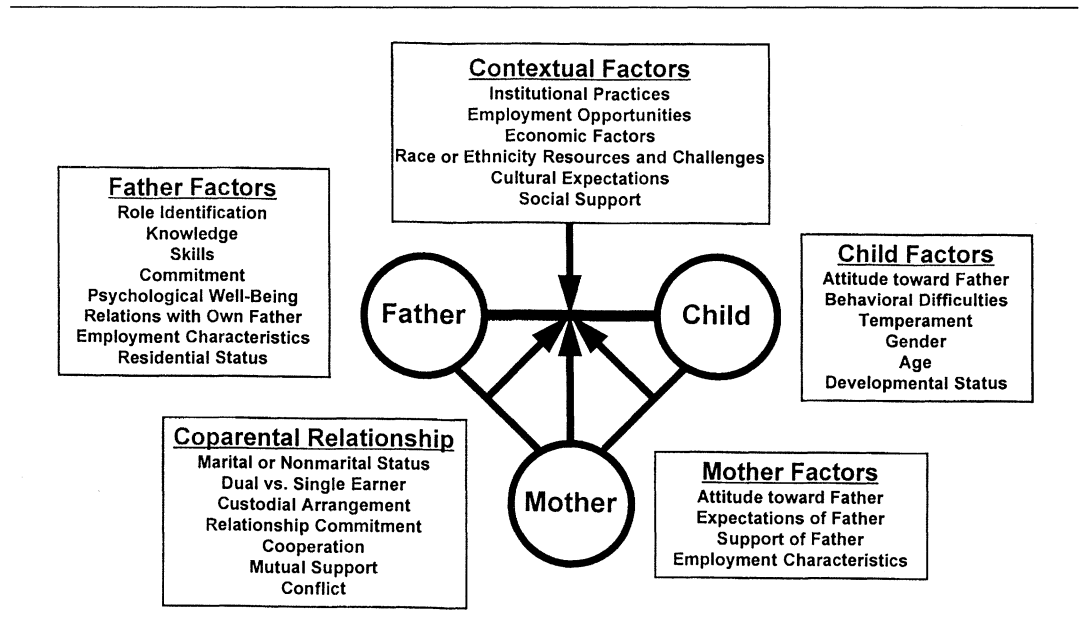
Although the model can depict fathers' indirect influence on their children through their support for the mother, the focus here is on direct father-child interaction. And although the influences depicted in the model also can be viewed as influencing the father directly, we prefer to focus on the effects on father-child relations because enhancing those relations and, therefore, the well-being of children is the ultimate goal of programs for fathers.

The research reviewed for this article supports the notion that father-child relations are more strongly influenced than mother-child relations by three of the dimensions of the model: the coparental relationship, factors in the other parent, and larger contextual factors.

Coparental Relationship

A number of studies have shown that the quality of father-child relations both inside and outside marriage is more highly correlated with the quality of the coparental relationship than is true for the mother-child relationship (Belsky & Volling, 1987; Cox, Owen, Lewis, & Henderson, 1989; Feldman, Nash, & Aschenbrenner, 1983; Levy-Shiff & Israelashvili, 1988). Fathers appear to withdraw from their child when they are not getting along with the mother, whereas mothers do not show a similar level of withdrawal. This is one way to understand the tendency of fathers to remove themselves from their children's lives after a breakup with the mother, especially if they have a negative relationship with the mother (Ahrons & Miller, 1993). As Furstenberg and Cherlin (1991) have asserted, for many men, marriage and parenthood are a "package deal." Or one might say that in American culture, a woman is a mother all of her life, but a man is a father if he has a wife. Furthermore, if he has a wife but does not get along with her, he may be present as a father, but the quality of his relationship with his children is apt to suffer.

One reason that fathering is particularly sensitive to the marital or coparental relationship is that standards and expectations for fathering appear to be more variable than those for mothering. There is more negotiation in families over what fathers will do than over what mothers will do and hence more dependence among fathers on the quality and outcome of those negotiations (Backett, 1987). As Lewis and O'Brien (1987) state, men have a less clear "job description" as fathers than women do as mothers. Therefore, fathers' behavior is strongly influenced by the meanings

and expectations of fathers themselves, as well as mothers, children, extended family, and broader cultural institutions.

One of the most sensitive areas of research on fathering is the importance of fathers being married to the children's mothers. Because many fathers are not married to the mother, it can seem prejudicial to these men and their children—and perhaps to single-parent mothers—to emphasize the importance of marriage. On the other hand, an implication of our review of the research and our conceptual framework is that, for most American heterosexual fathers, the family environment most supportive of fathering is a caring, committed, and collaborative marriage. This kind of marriage means that the father lives with his children and has a good partnership with their mother. These are the two principal intrafamilial determinants of responsible fathering.

Some of the controversy over the role of marriage in responsible fathering can be circumvented by specifying the quality of the marriage, as we have done. It is the quality of the marital process, rather than the legal or coresidential status, that most affects fathering. One might argue, then, that being married is not important because cohabiting couples could have the same qualities of relationship. Although, in principle, this is true, the best national research on cohabitation indicates that cohabitation is a temporary arrangement for most heterosexual couples; they eventually either marry or break up (Bumpass et al., 1991). We conclude that, in practice, the kind of mother-father relationship most conducive to responsible fathering in contemporary U.S. society is a caring, committed, collaborative marriage. Outside of this arrangement, substantial barriers stand in the way of active, involved fathering.

Mother Factors

Among external influences on fathering, the role of the mother has particular salience because mothers serve as partners and sometimes as gatekeepers in the father-child relationship, both inside and outside marriage (De Luccie, 1995). Mother factors in the conceptual model, of course, interact with the coparental relationship because the mother's personal feelings about the father influence the coparental relationship. But there is also evidence that, even within satisfactory marital relationships, a father's involvement with his children, especially young children, is often contingent on the mother's attitudes toward, expectations of,

and support for the father, as well as the extent of her involvement in the labor force (De Luccie, 1995; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Melby, 1990). Marsiglio (1991), using the National Survey of Families and Households data set, found that mothers' characteristics were more strongly correlated with fathers' involvement than fathers' own characteristics were. Indeed, studies have shown that many mothers, both inside and outside marriage, are ambivalent about the fathers' active involvement with their children (Baruch & Barnett, 1986; Cowan & Cowan, 1987). Given the powerful cultural forces that expect absorption by women in their mothering role, it is not surprising that active paternal involvement would threaten some women's identity and sense of control over this central domain of their lives. The evolution of a social consensus on responsible fathering, therefore, will necessarily involve a consensus that responsible mothering means supporting the father-child bond.

Contextual Factors

Research demonstrates the particular vulnerability of fathering to contextual and institutional practices—from the establishment of legal paternity to the greater impact of unemployment on fathering than on mothering. Lack of income and poor occupational opportunities appear to have a particularly negative effect on fathering (Thomson, Hanson, & McLanahan, 1994). The prevalence of the abandonment of economic and psychological responsibilities among poor, unemployed men and among other men who undergo financial and employment crises is partly a function of the unique vulnerability of fathering to perceived success in the external environment (Jones, 1991; McLoyd, 1989). This analysis suggests that fathering is especially sensitive to changes in economic forces in the work force and marketplace and to shifts in public policy. It also suggests that fathering suffers disproportionately from negative social forces, such as racism, that inhibit opportunities in the environment. McLoyd (1990), in a review and conceptual analysis of economic hardship in African American families, describes how poverty and racism combine to create psychological distress, which is, in turn, associated with more negative parenting styles and more difficulty in the coparental relationship.

Our conceptual model also depicts the positive contribution of ethnic and cultural factors to fathering. One aspect of responsible fathering, that of

economic support, is nearly universally expected of fathers by their cultures (Lamb, 1987b). La-Rossa (1997), in his historical analysis, has demonstrated how changing cultural expectations in the first part of the twentieth century led to more nurturing father involvement in the U.S. Allen and Connor (1997) have examined how role flexibility and concern for children in the African American community create opportunities for men to become involved in surrogate father relationships with children who lack day-to-day contact with their biological fathers. Unfortunately, there has not been much empirical research that examines fathering in its cultural context, using representative samples of fathers to explore how cultural meanings and practices influence fathers' beliefs and behaviors.

The final contextual factor in the model is social support, which Belsky (1984) emphasized in his theoretical model of parenting and which McLoyd (1990) documented as a crucial factor in diminishing the negative effects of poverty on parenting behavior. However, most of the research on social support specifically for fathers has focused on mothers as sources of social support. Pleck (1997) reviewed the limited research on extrafamilial social support for fathering and found the studies skimpy and inconsistent, except for the pattern that highly involved fathers tend to encounter negative attitudes from acquaintances, relatives, and fellow workers. Clearly, there is a need for studies that examine the sources and influences of social support on fathering, particularly the role of other fathers.

From the perspective of both the contextual factors and the mother factors discussed thus far, fathering can be conceptualized as a more contextually sensitive process than mothering is. Not that mothering is not also contextually sensitive, but the cultural norms are stricter on the centrality and endurance of the mother-child dyad, regardless of what is happening outside that relationship. Father-child relations, on the other hand, are culturally defined as less dyadic and more multilateral, requiring a threshold of support from inside the family and from the larger environment. Undermining from the mother or from a social institution or system may induce many fathers to retreat from responsible fathering unless their own individual level of commitment to fathering is quite strong.

This point about the ecological sensitivity of fathering is a principal conclusion of this article. It suggests that fathering programs and policy initiatives that focus only on fathers will benefit

mainly fathers who already have a supportive social and economic environment. Fathers whose context is less supportive—for example, fathers who do not live with their children, who have strained relationships with the mother, or who are experiencing economic stress—will need more extensive and multilateral efforts to support their fathering.

Child Factors

Individual child factors are included in the model for completeness, but the child factors studied in the research literature do not appear to be as important as the other dimensions in influencing fathering. Fathers do appear to find it easier to be more involved with their sons, especially older sons, presumably because they identify with them and are more comfortable communicating with them (Marsiglio, 1991). Most of the other child factors, such as age, appear to influence mothers as much as fathers, although Larson (1993) and Larson and Richards (1994) have documented how fathers withdraw more from parent-adolescent conflict than mothers do. More research is needed on the influence of the child's temperament and developmental status on relations with nonresidential fathers. Similarly, research is needed on how the child's beliefs about father involvement influence fathers' and mothers' expectations and behavior.

Mother-Child Relationship Factors

We include this domain for theoretical completeness, but we could find no research directly examining how the father-child relationship is affected by the mother-child relationship. Such effects may be tapped indirectly through other dimensions in the model, such as the mother's attitudes toward the father's involvement with the child. For example, a close mother-child bond, combined with an ambivalent maternal attitude toward paternal involvement, might lead to less closeness of the father than a situation in which a mother had the same attitude but, herself, was less close to the child.

Father Factors

Fathers' role identification, skills, and commitment are important influences on fathering (Baruch & Barnett, 1986; Ihinger-Tallman et al., 1995; Pleck, 1997). These three appear to fluctu-

ate from low to high levels along with a number of interpersonal and contextual factors, such as the mother's expectations and the father's residential status with his children (Marsiglio, 1995; Ihinger-Tallman et al., 1995). In American culture, fathers are given more latitude for commitment to, identification with, and competence in their parental role. This latitude brings with it the price of confusion for many fathers about how to exercise their roles (Daly, 1995).

The variability of the individual father factors suggests two important implications of our conceptual model: that the positive support from mothers and the larger context can move men in the direction of more responsible parenting even in the face of modest personal investment, and that strong father commitment, knowledge, and skills are likely to be necessary to overcome negative maternal, coparental, and contextual influences. This latter point is similar to Lamb's (1987a) hypothesis that high levels of father motivation can override institutional barriers and the lack of social support.

As for the father's experience in his own family of origin, some research suggests that the father's relationship with his own father may be a factor—either through identifying with his father or compensating for his father's lapses—in contributing to his own role identification, sense of commitment, and self-efficacy (Cowan & Cowan, 1987; Daly, 1995). Snarey (1993), in a longitudinal study, documented the role of multigenerational connections between fathers.

The final father factors, psychological well-being and employment characteristics, have been studied extensively. Research examining psychological adjustment and parenting quality consistently shows a positive relationship between fathers' (and mothers') psychological well-being and their parenting attitudes and skills (Cox et al., 1989; Levy-Shiff & Israelashvili, 1988; Pleck, 1997). The research on job loss and economic distress generally has examined declines in psychological well-being as mediating factors leading to poorer fathering (Elder et al., 1984; Elder et al., 1985; Jones, 1991). And fathers' work situations have been shown to have mixed relationships with involvement with children. Specific work schedules are not strongly related to involvement, but greater flex time and other profamily practices are associated with more father involvement (Pleck, 1997). Indeed, consistent with other research on fathering, mothers' employment characteristics are more strongly associated with fathers' in-

volement than fathers' employment characteristics. When mothers are employed, fathers' proportionate share of parenting is greater, although studies are inconsistent about the absolute level of father involvement (Pleck, 1997).

Conceptual Overview

The conceptual model outlines multiple factors that influence fathering, from individual and relational to contextual. The factors can be viewed as additive. For example, low identification with the parental role, combined with low expectations from the mother, would be strongly associated with low involvement of the father in both residential and non-residential contexts. High identification with the parental role, combined with high expectations from the mother, would lead to greater father involvement in any residential context.

The factors in the model also can be viewed as interactive. For example, high role identification and good employment and income might be sufficient to offset low expectations from the mother. Similarly, not living with the child could be offset by the father's strong commitment to his children and the support of the mother. And strong institutional support through public policies could mitigate unmarried fathers' and mothers' reluctance to declare paternity.

Although the conceptual framework is intended to apply to the four domains of responsible fathering (paternity, presence, economic support, and involvement), most of the research has focused on one or another of these areas. Indeed, the bulk of the empirical research has been on father involvement. Researchers have tended to assume that economic factors uniquely influence economic support and that father factors uniquely influence father involvement. Putting a range of factors into one model challenges researchers to examine how all the factors might influence all the domains of responsible fathering. We acknowledge that some components of the model are likely to influence some aspects of fathering more than others.

Finally, the model should be seen as depicting a dynamic set of processes, rather than a set of linear, deterministic influences. Systemic, ecological models run the risk of reducing the target behavior—in this case, responsible fathering—to a contextually determined phenomenon stripped of individual initiative and self-determination. We want to emphasize the pivotal role of fathers, themselves, in appropriating or discarding cultural and contextual messages, in formulating a father-

ing identity and developing fathering skills with their own children, in working out their feelings about their own fathers, and in dealing collaboratively with their children's mother. The social construction of fatherhood is an evolving creation of all stakeholders in the lives of children, and contemporary fathers have a central role in this creation. The active construction of fathering by fathers, themselves, is not a prominent theme in the research literature, although it is crucial to programs that work with fathers. More qualitative research is needed to explore the kinds of identity development and social negotiation that constitute the experience of fathering.

CONCLUSION

This article delineates a conceptual model of influences on fathering that can serve as a stimulus for future research, programming, and policy development. The main premise, supported by a variety of studies, is that fathering is uniquely sensitive to contextual influences, both interpersonal and environmental. Fathering is a multilateral relationship, in addition to a one-to-one relationship. A range of influences—including mothers' expectations and behaviors, the quality of the coparental relationship, economic factors, institutional practices, and employment opportunities—all have potentially powerful effects on fathering. These contextual factors shape the major domains of responsible fathering discussed here: acknowledgment of paternity, willingness to be present and provide economic support, and level of involvement with one's children. When these influences are not supportive of the father-child bond, a man may need a high level identification with the father role, strong commitment, and good parenting skills to remain a responsible father to his children, especially if he does not live with them.

This review and conceptual model deal with factors that promote active, involved fathering, not with the effects of that kind of fathering on children. (See review by Pleck, 1997.) Nor do we take a position on whether there are essential characteristics of fathering versus mothering or whether having parents of two genders is necessary for the well-being of children. The growing literature on gay and lesbian parenting suggests that these kinds of questions are more complex than many scholars assumed in the past (Patterson, 1992; Patterson & Chan, 1997). However, it is not necessary to resolve these issues in order to address the factors that enhance and inhibit the

parenting of men in the role of father in the late twentieth century.

A potentially controversial conclusion of this article is that a high quality marriage is the optimal context for promoting responsible fatherhood. This position moves opposite the trend in contemporary family studies to disaggregate marriage and parenting. We do not suggest that men cannot parent adequately outside this context or that children must be raised in a married household in order to grow up well adjusted. However, we believe that the research strongly indicates that substantial barriers exist for most men's fathering outside a caring, committed, collaborative marriage and that the promotion of these kinds of enduring marital partnerships may be the most important contribution to responsible fathering in our society.

An encouraging implication of this systemic, ecological analysis is that there are many pathways to enhancing the quality of father-child relationships. Fathering can be enhanced through programs and policies that help fathers relate to their coparent, that foster employment and economic opportunities if needed, that change institutional expectations and practices to better support fathers, and that encourage fathers' personal commitment to their children.

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