

background

Report # 84

Non-Custodial Fathers As Engaged Parents

December 2006

Reaching out to fathers without custody

Getting this forgotten population involved in family life benefits children

Children who grow up with both a mother and father in their lives tend to do better developmentally. Yet, for all of the efforts to design more effective policies and service initiatives for improving the outcomes of children, little has been done to help non-custodial fathers become more effective, engaged parents.

Fathers without custody of their children remain a challenging and largely forgotten population. Many services are not designed to include men. And there is a shortage of programs that address the needs of non-custodial fathers, which range from legal help with custody issues to learning about parenting and child development.

“We are very good at providing services to mothers and children,” said Kathryn Rudy, Director of Community and Internal Affairs for the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development. “The question is, how can we also provide a father-friendly environment and services specifically designed to support fathers.”

Non-custodial fathers only recently began receiving national attention when federal legislation was passed requiring all non-custodial fathers to fulfill their child support obligations. But child support laws are largely punitive and fail to help them navigate the legal system or offer them support services to help them become involved and responsible fathers to their children.

An example of efforts to bridge that service gap is the Fathers Collaborative in Allegheny County, a partnership involving Goodwill Industries of Pittsburgh, the University of Pittsburgh

Office of Child Development, and the University of Pittsburgh School of Law. The collaborative, supported by a range of grants, has gradually increased the number of father-specific services in the county, including father-specific child development education, legal aide regarding custody and visitation, and a program to help ex-offenders meet their child support obligations. It has also worked on ways to encourage organizations that serve families to engage fathers in their programs.

Such initiatives have their work cut out for them. Nearly 17 million American children go to bed every night in fatherless homes.¹ In Allegheny County alone, an estimated 80,000 children live in fatherless homes and the county’s active child support caseload totals nearly 74,000.

Impact On Children

Children who grow up in fatherless homes, especially low-income, di-

“Deadbeat Dads” has become a popular label for men who fall behind in child support payments. But perceptions that depict single fathers as child support dodgers or as eager to shirk the responsibility of family belie the findings of national studies.

vorced families, are at higher risk of poor outcomes, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and other sources. For example, they are:

- At 77% greater risk of being physically abused and 87% more likely to be harmed by neglect.
- Three times more likely to fail in school.
- Twice as likely to abuse drugs.
- Two to three times more likely to develop emotional or behavioral problems.
- Three times more likely to commit suicide.
- And five times more likely to live in poverty.

On the other hand, studies report that growing up with an involved father is associated with a number of benefits.

- Children with involved fathers are

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less likely to receive prenatal and infant medical care and babies are more likely to be born healthy.

- These children tend to enjoy better relationships with their families.
- They are more likely to experience better cognitive outcomes as infants and do better in math and science when they enter school.
- They are more likely to develop higher self-esteem, higher levels of empathy and pro-social behavior, and have lower rates of depression and drug and alcohol use.

Common Perceptions Misleading

“Deadbeat dads” has become a popular label for those who fall behind in their child support payments, regardless of circumstance. And misconceptions linger about their willingness to become involved in the lives of their children, particularly when the fathers in question are young.

But perceptions that paint single fathers as child support dodgers or as eager to shirk the responsibility of family contradict evidence reported in several national studies, including the National Survey of Adolescent Males, conducted by The Urban Institute, and The Fragile Families and Child Well Being Study by Princeton University and Columbia University.

Evidence suggests most non-custodial fathers have a sense of responsibility for raising their children and want to have a relationship with their children. For example, 75% of young unmarried fathers visited their baby and the mother in the hospital after birth. They listed care and support of their child as their most important role.

The studies also report that 70% of non-custodial fathers visited their child at least twice a week during the first and

second years of the child’s life and half of them visited their child or children daily.

Getting Them Involved

Animosity between the mother and the father may be an obstacle to uniting the family. Some men may feel incompetent when it comes to raising children or lack a basic understanding of child development. Unemployment, criminal records, low education, and an inability to meet child support obligations are other barriers to their family involvement.

In Allegheny County, the Fathers Collaborative began five years ago to build a network of support to address some of the obstacles that discourage non-custodial fathers from being more involved parents.

A family law clinic was established with the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, which trains second- and third-year law students, who, in turn, give free legal aid to qualified non-custodial fathers on visitation and other custody-related issues that might stand in their way of becoming involved with their children and families.

One of the few father-specific parent education programs in the nation, “The Man’s Guide To Child Development,” was established with support from the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Develop-

ment and Parenting Education and the Pennsylvania Children’s Trust Fund. “We discovered many of these fathers had no realistic expectations of what their child should be doing at a certain age,” Rudy said.

Another collaborative partner, Goodwill Industries of Pittsburgh, launched Project Support Children through Learning and Employment to address unpaid child support among ex-criminal offenders by providing a range of supports aimed at helping them get full-time jobs and improving their ability to regularly pay child support. Landing steady work out of prison is an important factor in the child support equation. A study of inmates at the Allegheny County Jail reported of the 59% who have child support orders and the average total order on arrears was \$10,727.

Another strategy of the collaborative involves working with service organizations to include non-custodial fathers in their programs – something many have little experience doing. For example, an OCD survey of family support centers in Allegheny County found that although they were willing, centers said the lack of training, recruitment and retention methods, and other barriers made it difficult for them to expand their programs to include programs specifically targeted to fathers.

**references**

- ¹ Horn, W.F. (1998). *Fatherhood facts*, The National Fatherhood Initiative, Gaithersburg, Maryland.

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