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# Helping Nonresidential Fathers: The Case for Teen and Adult Unmarried Fathers

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**ABSTRACT**

Nonresidential fathers, particularly those who are unmarried teens and unmarried adults, are often neglected in social work practice in the United States. This article examines their changing demographics and describes several policies and programs that have been successful in assisting them in becoming more involved in their children's lives. The literature is still very limited about who they are, what they need, and how we can help them. Yet, what is known suggests that relatively large numbers want to be or are attempting to be involved with their children. Timing is important in helping them establish their paternity and become active at their child's birth or before. The article calls for social workers to make a greater commitment to these unmarried nonresidential fathers in very specific ways.

Nonresidential fathers are a growing group of fathers in the United States, and much is still unknown about how we can help them (e.g., Strug & Wilmore-Schaeffer, 2003; Vosler & Robertson, 1998). *Nonresidential fathers*[*] is a term currently used to identify fathers who do not live in the primary residence of their children. One way that these nonresidential fathers can be described in greater detail is as three fairly distinct subgroups: noncustodial divorced fathers, adult unmarried fathers, and teenage unmarried fathers. Because the most is known about noncustodial divorced fathers, the article focuses primarily on the remaining two groups of nonresidential fathers—adult and teen unmarried fathers. This article examines their changing demographics, describes both their similarities and diverse needs, and highlights several policies and programs that have been successful in assisting them in becoming more involved in their children's lives. The article urges social workers to make a greater commitment to these groups of fathers at this time.

The author's viewpoint is that biological fathers who do not live on a daily basis with their children have a unique role, potential or real, to play in raising their children by virtue of their inherent biological connection to their children. A large body of literature focusing on the impact of both father absence and father presence supports this viewpoint and is reported extensively elsewhere (e.g., Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Amato & Keith, 1991; Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, & Lamb, 2000; Dudley & Stone, 2001; Johnson, 1996; LeMenestrel, 1999; Spillman, Deschamps, & Crews, 2004; Videon, 2005). It is also important to recognize that parental involvement, whether by the father or mother, is not always the preferred mode of child raising, particularly when that parent has a serious mental illness, an uncontrolled substance abuse problem, or is

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abusive toward a spouse or their children (e.g., Braver & O'Connell, 1998).

Defining the nature of father involvement is an ongoing research endeavor of its own. Lamb's (1986) classic typology of a father's involvement includes three major categories: interactions with the child, psychological and physical accessibility to the child, and responsibilities for the care or welfare of the child. More recent efforts to further define father involvement, both qualitatively and quantitatively, have been extensive and continue (e.g., Day & Lamb, 2004; Finley & Schwartz, 2004; Hawkins & Palkovitz, 1999; Hofferth, Stueve, Pleck Bianchi, & Sayer, 2002; Palkovitz, 1997). Viewing father involvement as including a diverse range of roles and activities related to raising children is preferable because it encourages men to participate in their children's lives in a variety of ways. While it is strongly recommended that all fathers have a reasonable amount of direct quality contact with their children, these measures recognize that a father can also choose other areas of involvement in which he has strengths and strong support from his cultural group.

## Important Demographic Trends

Some important national trends provide a fuller understanding of the changing status of nonresidential fathers. These trends, increasingly manifested over the past three decades, are indicators of a pattern of increasingly large numbers of children living without their biological father. One pertinent trend is the decline of two-biological parent households with children. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2005a), the proportion of married-couple families with children declined from 89% in 1970 to 71% in 2004. Since the Census definition of "married-couple families" includes stepfathers, adopted fathers, and separated fathers, as well as biological fathers, the percentages of biological fathers present at both points in time are even lower. During the same period, the proportion of single-parent (either mother or father) families grew from 11% to 28%. Based on the Census definition, "single-parent families" are never-married, divorced, and widowed parents.

A second important trend is that the number of children in unmarried families has increased significantly more than in divorced families. Growing numbers of couples and single women are now beginning their families without marriage. This trend may have the most impact on the biological father's involvement. Approximately 42% of all children under 18 years living in mother-only households in 2004 were unmarried, in contrast to 7% in 1970; while the percent of children living with divorced mothers remained fairly stable during this period (34% in 2004 and 31% in 1970) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005b). The divorce rate increased dramatically since 1960 but has leveled off in recent years (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). Divorce has increased considerably for women and men 15 years and older from 1970 to 1990 (5.7% of women and 3.5% of men in 1970 versus 11.7% of women and 8.8% of men in 1990). Since 1990, the divorce rates have begun to stabilize (13.3% of women in 2003, and 10.1% of men in 2003).

Important trends are also evident by ethnic and cultural subgroup over time. Most children from all ethnic groups were raised in husband–wife marriages in 1970. Before the 1960s, for example, 75% of all African American families had both parents present (Billingsley, 1968). By 2004, though, 50% of all African American children were living with a single mother, in contrast to 30% in 1970. Among White children, 18% were living with a single mother in 2004, but only 8% were in 1970. Finally, 25% of all Hispanic children lived with a single mother in 2004, whereas 20% did in 1980. (Data were not available for Hispanic children in 1970.) Other ethnic patterns are also evident in many recent studies. For example, only 8% of families of African American children without the biological father present in 1990 included a new husband or partner of the biological mother, compared to 21% of non–African American children. Yet, 13% of these African American children (vs. 4% of non–African American children) had potentially significant contact with a father figure on a daily basis (Mott, 1990).

## Profiles of Teen and Adult Unmarried Nonresidential Fathers

One particular way of identifying and exploring this large and diverse group of nonresidential fathers with more specificity is by examining distinct subgroups. When we examine nonresidential fathers more closely, we find that divorced fathers are no longer the only major subgroup. Unmarried fathers, in particular, make up a growing and distinctly different group needing social workers' attention as well. Another group highlighted in this article, teen fathers, is also in need of more focused attention because of their unique developmental needs and issues related to parenting such as financial difficulties, an incomplete education, feelings of "loss" as a parent related to their own youth, tensions with their own parents, and their partner's parents, and other stressors common to adolescence.

### *Teen Fathers*

Large-scale studies that provide accurate information about teen fathers are still sparse. What is known about teen dads is largely drawn from national health statistics on teen mothers, small studies with convenience samples, and feedback from teen fathers in teen clinical programs. Extensive statistical data are available on teenage mothers, their pregnancies, and their birth experiences. Teenage birthrates have declined continuously since 1991, reaching historic lows in 2005 (Franzetta, Ikramullah, Manlove, Moore, & Terry-Humen, 2005). This represents a decline of about 21% in the number of births to teens since a recent peak in 1990. Yet, 82% of these births occurred outside of a marriage, compared to 35% of births to women of all ages during this time. Teen marital birthrates have declined 32% between 1990 and 2002, while nonmarital teen birthrates have declined by 24% from their peak in 1994 to 2002. In addition, pregnancy among teen parents is more likely to be unintentional and unplanned, while it is more intentional among older parents (Cabrera et al., 2000). This becomes important, in part, because active fathering is more likely to occur with an intentional pregnancy and less likely if it is unintentional.

Considering race and ethnicity, birthrates in 2003 for all racial and ethnic groups were at an all-time low. Between 1991 and 2003, the birthrates for Hispanic teens declined the least, by 22%, whereas the African American teen birthrates declined by 45%, and White birthrates by 35%. In 2003, teen birthrates per 1,000 females were 65 for African American teens, 28 for Whites, and 82 for Hispanic teens. Among Hispanic teen births, teens of Mexican origin have the highest birthrates, and those of Cuban origin the lowest (Ryan, Franzetta, & Manlove, 2005). In this same time period, 75% of African American teen births were unintended, as compared to 67% of White births and 46% of Hispanic births. It is difficult to make broad generalizations about the racial and ethnic makeup of teen fathers, however, because they are often not listed on the birth registration forms of children born to teen mothers.

The social, economic, and personal costs of teenage pregnancy are well known (e.g., Holtz, McElroy, & Saunders, 1997; Ellis et al., 2003). Teen mothers have lower rates of high school completion, lower lifetime earnings, higher rates of single parenting, and higher rates of public assistance than nonteenage mothers. Generally, fathers of teen births are also less well educated, have lower academic abilities, commit more crimes, and are more likely to have economically disadvantaged parents, compared to other comparable young men who were not fathers (Marsiglio, 1995). These differences were much larger for white unwed fathers than African Americans when compared to their peers.

Many of the fathers of children born to adolescent mothers are more than 20 years old (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Landry & Forrest, 1995; Larson, Hussey, Gillmore, & Gilchrist, 1996). Most teenage pregnancies involve 18- or 19-year-old females and males in their early 20s. Therefore, the age difference between the father and mother is typically 3 to 4 years. Thus, although there are a substantial number of teenage fathers in this country, a large percentage of adolescent pregnancies are linked to male adults, not teenage boys.

Findings of small studies of teen fathers have been beneficial in beginning to challenge many potentially harmful stereotypes about teen fathers (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Rhoden & Robinson, 1997). Many young fathers report that they genuinely want to be actively involved in their role as a parent. A primary factor in predicting a higher likelihood of continued father involvement is the existence of a continuous romantic relationship between the biological parents (Gavin et al., 2002; Gee & Rhodes, 2003; Kalil, Ziol-Guest, & Coley, 2005; Krishnakumar & Black, 2003). The quality of the relationship between the mother and the father's family and the support and role expectations provided by the paternal grandmother positively influences young fathers' involvement as well (Bunting & McAuley, 2004; Kalil et al., 2005). In addition, when maternal grandmothers, often a key gatekeeper, have a positive relationship with the biological father, fathers are more likely to stay involved (Krishnakumar & Black, 2003). Other factors fathers report as creating barriers to their active involvement include developmental immaturity; lack of education; financial dependence; painful or conflicted relationships with their own fathers; strained relationships with the mother of their child; hostile family and friends; and the perception of a preferential bias of schools, hospitals and social service agencies toward the biological mother (e.g., Allen & Doherty, 1996).

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Although teen fathers have been thought to be uncaring and uninvolved with their children, more recent data suggest that some are just the opposite—fathering is a central part of their lives. Kalil et al., (2005), for example, found that two thirds of their sample of 77 teen fathers were reported by the biological mothers to have high levels of parental involvement, particularly in the child's first few years of life. In this study, the mothers with positive relationships with fathers and their families had greater father involvement. Unfortunately, such active fathering has tended to be reduced to low levels of involvement over time. This study and others indicate that up to two thirds of adolescent fathers were no longer actively involved with their children after 3 years (Gee & Rhodes, 2003; Kalil et al., 2005).

### *Unmarried Adult Fathers*

Among the subgroups of nonresidential fathers, the least seems to be known about unmarried adult fathers and their parenting. This is evident in the relative sparseness of professional literature on this topic. Unmarried fathers are also the fastest growing of the three subgroups. Unmarried fathers are often difficult to identify, particularly if their legal status is not connected to their child and if their initial commitment to the child is low. Establishing paternity at or soon after birth is critical to identifying them. Also, reliable information on unmarried couples and unmarried single mothers and single fathers is still difficult to find. One helpful development by the U.S. Census in 1990 was to add the category, "unmarried cohabiting parents." The number of cohabitating couples rose 50% from 1990 to 1997, with childbearing occurring in about one fourth of these families (Casper & Cohen, 2000).

Unmarried couples living together consist of an exceedingly diverse group of people, particularly with regard to the level of the father's commitment to his family. Some unmarried relationships appear a lot like marriages, while others have little or no resemblance to marriage (Dudley & Stone, 2001; Townsend, 2003). An unmarried father could be deeply committed to his partner, and the couple may consider themselves married without the formal sanctions. Such a couple may plan ahead, often with the utmost care, to have an offspring, and both may become actively involved in parenting their child. In time, they may decide to get married. In contrast, unmarried relationships can be short-lived and without commitments. An unmarried father may have no intention of becoming involved as a parent. He could be a casual acquaintance of the biological mother or not even know the biological mother. He could also be a sperm donor. Unfortunately, many of these unmarried relationships have common characteristics—little stability, vulnerability to conflicts, and being prone to breaking up.

Most unmarried fathers have important demographic differences from divorced fathers, including being more economically disadvantaged and less well-educated (Insabella, Williams, & Pruett, 2003). These disadvantages are most evident for minority fathers. In their parental role, unmarried fathers generally are less likely to be involved with their children than divorced fathers, have fewer parental rights, and report more conflicts in attempts to see their children (Dudley & Stone, 2001). This can be partially attributed to family courts, which have not recognized unmarried fathers' parental rights in the past and have only recently become sensitive to some of their unique parental issues. In addition, the lower level of father involvement could be associated with an unplanned birth or a very unstable or casual relationship with the biological mother. Actually, the father may not even be initially aware of the child's birth if his relationship with the mother has discontinued.

Unmarried fathers are much less likely than divorced fathers to provide consistent financial support to their children and less likely to maintain consistent contact with their children (Mincy & Sorenson, 1998). Some studies reveal that initial rates of contact between unmarried fathers and their children may be similar to that of divorced fathers and their children, but this similarity does not hold up over time (Dudley & Stone, 2001). Some speculate that the high level of involvement of new never-married fathers is due to these men still being romantically involved with the mothers. When and if the relationship with the mother ends, the unwed fathers' involvement may drop off rapidly. Other studies have suggested that the level of contact between unmarried fathers and their children is consistently much lower than the contact between divorced fathers and their children. The children of unmarried parents, like those of divorced parents, are also at greater risk than children of married parents for neonatal mortality, poverty, dropping out of school, becoming pregnant, and being less attached to the labor force.

While research is limited, there seems to be growing evidence that despite these many problems, many nonresidential unmarried fathers desire contact with their children and are more involved than previously thought, and many find ways to contribute to their child's well-being (Dudley & Stone, 2001; Coley, 2001). In addition, many more unmarried fathers could become involved, but they report feeling unsure of their ability to do so, particularly because of unemployment and their financial limitations (Roy, 1999).

## Implications for Helping Nonresidential Fathers

Several books, program reports, and Web sites of national and local organizations offer excellent descriptions of innovative policy and program interventions for helping nonresidential fathers and are excellent supplements to the brief summary that follows (e.g., Bengtson, Acock, Allen, Dilworth-Anderson, & Klein, 2005; Dudley & Stone, 2001; Fagan & Hawkins, 2001; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Marsiglio & Hutchinson, 2004). In many cases these interventions can also be relevant to residential fathers and potential fathers. What may appear to be distinct, unchangeable categories of fathering (e.g., unmarried, single, divorced) can easily and unexpectedly change. For example, residential fathers can easily stumble into a nonresidential status through a marital separation or an unexpected job loss, while a nonresidential father, with relevant and timely interventions, could become a shared or joint residential father.

### Father-Friendly Perspective and Holistic Approach

A father-friendly perspective is recommended when designing and implementing programs especially helpful to teen and unmarried nonresidential fathers and their families. A father-friendly perspective includes at least three elements, including adopting a strengths perspective; being informed and responsive to racial, ethnic, and other diversity issues; and giving preference to conciliatory and collaborative strategies in helping families.

First, a father-friendly perspective for helping these fathers focuses on strengths rather than only on the fathers' deficits (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). Each father has assets or qualities that are worthy of recognition but may be overlooked. As an ally of fathers, we can help create a climate in which they can rediscover these assets and seek something of value for themselves and their families (Saleebey, 1997). While at times their strengths may be easy to identify, sometimes they can be camouflaged, concealed, and difficult to discover (Dudley & Stone, 2001). Strengths are evident, for example, in a father's loyalties, insights, patience, cultural heritage, parental pride, and survival skills. A major strength is the interest that a father expresses for his children. In this regard, his strengths can be detected in his stories about parent–child concerns such as his desire to see his children more often or his frustrations in negotiating with the child's mother when arranging visits.

Second, a father-friendly perspective is informed and responsive to diversity issues; particularly race and ethnicity are critical in designing and pursuing interventions. Fathers are very different in many ways across racial and ethnic identities (Toth & Xu, 1999), and some of these differences are evident in the different profiles of nonresidential fathers reported earlier. Other forms of diversity are also important, including gender differences between mothers and fathers based on both their biological makeup and socialization; influences of social class, particularly poverty; and sexual orientation.

Third, preferences for conciliatory and collaborative orientations are crucial because we know that children significantly benefit when fathers and mothers are cooperating. Conversely, adversarial and other competitive approaches should be avoided or used only when justified because of their likely exacerbating effect. Several studies have revealed that two of the most detrimental family circumstances for children after the parents uncouple are an absent parent and continuous and severe conflicts between a father and mother (e.g., Johnston, Kline, & Tschann, 1989; Lamb, 2002). Also, cooperative coparenting has been found to predict more frequent nonresidential father–child contact, a higher quality relationship between the father and child, and more responsive fathering (Sobolewski & King, 2005). The philosophy and principles of conciliatory and collaborative strategies are central to the help that is provided to nonresidential fathers, including valuing and respecting each party, being honest and reliable, using persuasion not coercion, and discovering common interests.

Along with a father-friendly perspective, interventions should be timely and implemented in a holistic and multiservice manner. Unmarried and teen nonresidential fathers need to be reached at the time of or before their child's birth and helped to become involved in an active parental role that can be sustained over time. Also, these fathers' problems are multidimensional and need help that potentially addresses many aspects of their parenting (e.g., Vosler & Robertson, 1998). Fathers may need help not only with parenting but also with employment, education, and individual counseling. Levine & Pitt (1995), for example, offered an exemplary program that is holistic and multidimensional in nature. Their Fatherhood Project has five overall strategies: preventing men from having babies before they are ready emotionally and financially; preparing them for the emotional, legal, and financial responsibilities of parenting; establishing paternity at childbirth as an important legal connection; involving fathers in developing a connection with their children; and actively supporting them in their various parenting roles.

The review of innovative policies and programs that follows is not intended to be exhaustive as several additional interventions can be identified that are helpful in enhancing a nonresidential father's parenting role. This limited review will highlight two types of interventions related to the profiles of unmarried adult and teen fathers presented earlier. One type includes policies and programs that have been particularly effective in helping noncustodial *divorced* fathers and should be made more readily available to unmarried teen and adult nonresidential fathers. The second type addresses some of the special and often unique needs of unmarried nonresidential fathers that should be given higher priority.

### Interventions Relevant to All Nonresidential Fathers

Efforts have been made to design and offer several types of policies and programs for divorced fathers over the last two decades that are also relevant for unmarried fathers. Unfortunately, these interventions are still largely overlooked and considered irrelevant for unmarried fathers. They include considering joint custody options, family mediation, various educational programs, child support and father visitation policies, and assisting fathers as economic providers.

**Exploring joint custody options.** In many cases, "joint residential" and "joint legal" custody should be considered for teen and adult unmarried fathers as well as divorced fathers. Growing evidence suggests that nonresidential fathers with joint custodial status are more likely to become and remain more involved with their children than those with noncustodial status, and they are more likely to pay regular child support (Braver & O'Connell, 1998; Dudley & Stone, 2001; Miller, 2006; Pearson &

Thoennes, 1990). These and other authors also cite strong evidence of particular father and family circumstances that contraindicate joint custody as a viable option.

As background information, divorced fathers with joint residential custody have the second highest level of custodial responsibility, after those with sole custody. Although an accurate count of joint residential fathers is difficult to come by, they have been estimated to be less than 5% of all divorced families (Nord, & Zill, 1996). Joint legal custody fathers number about 17% of all custodial arrangements, and these fathers share responsibility with their former wives for major decisions about their children without necessarily sharing residential custody. Both of these joint custody options can be implemented in various ways based on developing an individualized coparenting agreement. These variations are often based on the age and developmental needs of the children and the specific circumstances of the family, such as geographic distance between the parents and the family's religious and child discipline preferences (Dudley & Stone, 2001, pp. 262–291).

Unmarried fathers, in particular, make up a growing and distinctly different group needing social workers' attention as well.

**Family mediation.** Family mediation is another very useful intervention for nonresidential fathers and their families. Interventions that focus on the family system (father, mother, child, extended family) have been found to be more effective in reaching fathers and sustaining their parental role than those that focus only on the father (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002). Family mediation has become increasingly the preferred approach of many court systems, particularly in determining custody issues. Several studies have reported that a mediated divorce or custody settlement is more likely to provide a favorable postdivorce adjustment than adversarial negotiations, including agreements that are more satisfactory to the parents, greater compliance, and greater parental involvement by the father (Benjamin & Irving, 1995; Dillon & Emery, 1996). Once a divorce agreement and/or a parenting agreement have been completed, mediation services can also be enlisted to help implement the agreement or to resolve problems that may arise (Kelly, 1993). For example, males may need help in enhancing how they communicate with their former spouse, children, a stepparent, or other significant parties. Finally, a caution needs to be noted that mediation should not be encouraged if it places one or more family members in danger, such as in instances of family violence.

Unmarried parents are especially likely to benefit from mediation (Dudgeon, 1999; Miller, 2006; Raisner, 1997). Court-sponsored mediation of child custody decisions and parenting agreements usually do not distinguish between whether the couple is married or unmarried. Many of the decisions to be made on behalf of the children are similar regardless of the parents' marital status, and such services can then be extended to working out differences and other conflicts as they occur later on. Assumptions held by the mediator may need to be adjusted for unmarried parents and others (Dudley & Stone, 2001). For example, the mediator may need to learn how to help in the formation of *new* relationships between parents rather than focusing on trying to change previous roles. Mediation has also been effective in helping lower-income families explore the major challenges with the economic aspects of joint residential parenting (Donnelly & Finkelhor, 1993).

**Educational programs for fathers.** Several different types of educational programs are important to make available to unmarried fathers. Parenting skills, for example, can be a basic focus (e.g., Kiselica, 1995; Parra-Cardona, Wampler, & Sharp, 2006). Young men are usually introduced to the work world within their schools and families, but they have little opportunity to learn to develop empathy for others, supportive and collaborative skills, a capacity to listen, and other qualities inherent in effective parenting. They could also benefit from parenting programs focusing on child development and child care skills.

Programs are also needed for fathers and mothers who are uncoupling to inform them about the custody and divorce processes and the advantages of cooperative negotiations (Buehler, Betz, Ryan, Legg, & Trotter, 1992; Devlin, Brown, Beebe & Parulls, 1992). It is especially important to introduce this educational intervention as early as possible to encourage maximum cooperation and to prevent or minimize the likelihood of any counterproductive activity. Although these programs are often referred to as divorce education, such programs are usually designed for unmarried parents as well because they describe the various options for custody along with specific information on how parents can determine which custody option is most suitable to their family. The advantages and limitations of mediation and adversarial proceedings can also be described along with alerting them to the potentially harmful effects of each approach on the children and parents.

Programs helping these fathers develop their parental identities are also important. Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buehler (1995) pointed out that a key element in determining the father's involvement with his children after divorce is his identification with being a parent. His identity with his fathering role is based on several factors, including his commitment to his various parenting roles after divorce (e.g., provider, disciplinarian, nurturer), the salience of these parental roles in relation to his other roles (e.g., worker), and the degree to which his views of himself as a father correspond with the views of his significant others (e.g., former spouse, children, new lover, coworkers). Further, the people in his social network can be very important in positively influencing his identity as a parent, particularly a former spouse/partner and other people such as a romantic partner, his friends, coworkers, and employers (McBride et al., 2005).

Mentoring is a type of program that can help enhance a father's parental identity, particularly teen fathers. Mentors are typically older males who provide guidance, counsel, and support to younger males. Teen fathers in particular can gain a better understanding of the fathering role through a mentorship relationship. The goal is to help the young father develop a mature father identity that will enable him to learn the skills necessary for successful fathering. Mentoring programs can be particularly valuable to teen fathers who have had little or no exposure to good fathering and need to have an older father of similar background as a role model. There are times when an entire mentoring program should be grounded in a specific cultural or ethnic approach. For young fathers, the facilitation of an ethnic and cultural identity may increase their sense of self-sufficiency and pride, particularly in the area of developing a positive self-concept. Several culturally based themes can permeate a program. Empowerment is one such theme because it stresses that fathers can be in control of themselves and should play a significant role in the lives of their children. Another theme is helping others as you are being helped. In essence, this means that once the young father is on the right track, it is his responsibility to find another male and help him get on the right track.

**Child support and father visitation policies.** Child support is a necessary intervention in helping nonresidential fathers and their families that needs to be strictly enforced. Studies have found a direct association between paying child support and a father's involvement with his children (e.g., Peters, Argys, Howard, & Butler, 2004). One historical problem with the Child Support Enforcement legislation has been the focus only on nonresidential parents paying child support, which reinforces a narrow view of what fathers have to offer their families. More recently, the federal government has begun to recognize the family visitation rights of nonresidential parents as a legitimate public goal (Mincy & Pouncy, 2002). The Family Support Act of 1988 has funded several access and visitation demonstration programs to explore ways to remove barriers to visitation arrangements. Many of these visitation demonstration programs have been found to increase the frequency and quality of the father's involvement and his payment of child support, especially when intense therapeutic interventions were also employed (Fischer, 2002; Pearson & Thoennes, 1990). Unfortunately, it still remains unknown whether the government will sustain a long-term interest in these visitation initiatives.

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Act (PRWOA) of 1996 is a more recent federal initiative that includes a small but important provision on "access and visitation" programs for low-income fathers. In an apparent effort to increase noncustodial parents' involvement in their children's lives, the policy included grants to help states establish programs that support and facilitate the noncustodial parents' visitation with their children. This policy has helped several states begin exploring alternative ways of involving nonresidential fathers with their children. Some key fatherhood demonstration projects have been funded and have gained valuable experience that needs to be replicated across the country (Mincy & Pouncy, 2002).

On a sad note, the benefits of these federal and state initiatives are still not evident in many family court policies and practices. Studies continue to indicate that judges are taking strong stands in enforcing child support issues to assist custodial parents, but often feel less comfortable addressing visitation or access issues (Emery, 1995). As a result, many nonresidential fathers, divorced and unmarried, often still feel disregarded by the legal system (Braver & Griffin, 2000).

**Helping fathers become effective economic providers.** The economic capacity of a father is paramount, given that virtually all nonresidential fathers are expected to assume some financial responsibilities for their children. If a father can be a successful breadwinner, he can more easily be encouraged to become involved in other parental roles such as child raising and decision making. In this regard, enfranchising a father's parental role includes maximizing his likelihood of becoming successfully employed. Numerous studies have found that minority and low-income nonresidential fathers with jobs and formal education are more likely to be involved with their children (e.g., Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999). Those who *cannot* (as distinguished from *will not*) pay support are usually unemployed and underemployed teen and adult fathers who need substantial help with employment to fulfill their financial obligations. Child support enforcement agencies are increasingly considering alternative arrangements like reduced and delayed child support, job preparation, training, and other supports to strengthen the provider role. These are essential ingredients in the successful collection of child support from the group that cannot pay.

Employment counseling and training related to teen fathers need to take into account both short-term job availability and long-term career needs (Kiselica, 1995). Plans to complete high school should especially be considered a priority. If attention is only given to the short term, young fathers can be lulled into a false sense of security by the money they earn and consequently believe that there is no need to pursue further education or training. This could doom teen fathers to a future filled with lower salaries over the course of their lives.

### *Interventions Especially Relevant to Teen and Unmarried Fathers*

In addition to numerous policies and programs that are important for all nonresidential fathers, some programs are also needed that are designed specifically for unmarried adult and/or teen fathers based on their special needs and circumstances. A few key ones are highlighted next, including establishing paternity and providing comprehensive sex education.

**Establishing paternity.** Paternity establishment is a critical step for teen and unmarried fathers to take at the time of the child's birth or before. When paternity is established, there are benefits for both the mother and father. For the mother, paternity establishment is a prerequisite for establishing child support to assure financial assistance from the father. For the father, once paternity is established, he can legally assert his right to have direct involvement with his child. The establishment of paternity can be accomplished without much difficulty if both the mother and father are willing. However, several potential obstacles have been identified, and incentives and supports are needed to voluntarily verify his identity as a parent (Mincy, Garfinkel & Nepomnyaschy, 2005). Pathways are needed to certify a father's paternity as early as possible in the life of his child. These efforts must be coupled with other services, such as educational programs for fathers, job training, and family mediation, which also encourage him to participate in child raising and contribute financially.

Mincy et al., (2005) found that paternity establishment rates are increasing even though they vary widely from state to state. Their national sample of nonmarital births revealed an overall rate of paternity establishment of 69%. Also, six out of seven of established paternities occurred in hospitals where the child was born. Hospitals and prenatal clinics are especially important agency settings for social workers to intervene because the issue of timing is so important (Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002). The earlier that these fathers are engaged in assuming a parental role, the more likely that they become able to sustain a parental role. Mincy and colleagues (2005) found a positive association between paternity establishment and two key factors, payment of child support and a father's involvement with his child. PRWORA clients, in particular, when encouraged to establish paternity, increased both their child support and involvement with their children.

**Comprehensive sex education.** Sex education programs are also essential for males, particularly teen fathers and teenagers who are not yet parents. Historically, these programs have primarily focused on young women. Such programs must also focus on helping males assume some of the responsibilities of making safe sexual decisions along with the females. These programs are also needed to prevent unwanted pregnancy and point out the dangers of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Such programs are most effective if they are designed to help participants develop greater self-esteem and a sense of ownership of their responsibilities in pregnancy prevention and parenting. Several excellent examples of a sex education program for young fathers exist in the literature (e.g., Manlove, Terry-Humen, Papillo, Franzetta, Williams, & Ryan, 2002; Sonenstein, Stewart, Lindberg, Pernas, & Williams, 1997).

Several other policies and programs can promote the parental involvement of nonresidential fathers and are only briefly identified here because of limited space. Individual help is often needed—possibly intensive counseling, an agency referral, affirmation of their parental rights, negotiating an unsupportive bureaucracy, responding to multiethnic issues, or simply support and encouragement (e.g., Fagan & Hawkins, 2001; Rasheed & Rasheed, 1999). Perhaps many fathers could also benefit from groups of other fathers particularly when they have significant difficulty communicating their feelings or personal needs (Hall & Kelly, 1996). Self-help groups can be invaluable for offering intimate conversations with other men about their personal needs and problems (Franklin & Davis, 2001).

Other couple and family-focused interventions, besides mediation, are also important for nonresidential fathers in promoting cooperative relationships between a father and other family members (e.g., Ho, Rasheed, & Rasheed, 2004). Even though the two parents may have decided to uncouple, they can still benefit from couple counseling that helps them to more fully understand each other in their new parental roles. Supportive workplace policies are also important, including paternity leave, flexible work schedules, family-oriented workshops, sick leave covering sick children, and child care spending accounts. Encouraging marriage is another important intervention when it can promote the children's long-term well-being. Other interventions include finding creative ways to counter negative images of fathers with positive ones in the media. Frequently, images in sitcoms, movies, and other media outlets portray the man as the bungling or disengaged dad, or by other characteristics conveying nothing of value to parenting children.

## Conclusion

An impressive amount of attention has been devoted to fathering over the past 25 landmark years that is evident in research studies, program innovations, and policy initiatives. Many of these works are cited in this article. However, unmarried adult and teen nonresidential fathers have largely been neglected or overlooked. A stage ahead for social workers is to focus increasingly on implementing what has been learned and tested with divorced fathers to unmarried nonresidential fathers. The article argues that a father-friendly approach is essential, including recognizing the strengths and potentials of fathers and their families along with their deficits, being sensitive and responsive to their varied economic and cultural factors, and promoting the capacity of mothers and fathers to work together as collaborators rather than as adversaries.

Approaching nonresidential fathers as a diverse collection of smaller, more distinct groups (divorced, unmarried adults, and unmarried teen fathers) can be helpful in designing and implementing interventions tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of each subgroup. Of the two subgroups highlighted in this article, unmarried adult fathers are the least well known and the most varied. Much more can still be learned about unmarried fathers who are highly committed to fathering as well as those with potential but no obvious developed commitment. Many of these fathers currently need more help in accessing many of the programs available to divorced fathers, such as family mediation, visitation demonstration projects, and counseling. They also need interventions designed especially to establish their paternity.

Teen fathers also need greater policy and program attention. For example, they often need more help in understanding the benefits of establishing paternity, and they need to feel they are valued parents in the life of their babies at birth and as their children grow older. They also need educational opportunities for job training, completing high school, sex education, and parenting skills. Since a large percentage of the fathers of teenage pregnancies are adults in their early 20s, they will need many of the educational and counseling services recommended for adult unmarried fathers as well.

Social workers have not often been among those in the forefront of helping nonresidential fathers. Our assessments and interventions can become much more sensitive, inclusive, and responsive to the father's importance in family systems. This is particularly the case when these fathers are not as visible or readily accessible as the mother, and when they appear less prepared and motivated to be parents. Nonresidential fathers have reported that they perceive social institutions such as schools, hospitals, family courts, and social service agencies to have a preferential bias in favor of the biological mother (Allen & Doherty, 1996). Social workers employed in all these social institutions can be a positive influence in overcoming this apparent bias and low priority given to nonresidential fathers in families. Knowing how important fathers are to their children's well-being can help in motivating us to overcome this bias in favor of a preference for active involvement by both parents.

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* It is important to note that the author has some concerns about using the term *nonresidential father*. Terms used to identify and describe specific groups of people tend to reflect our perceptions of who they are and the potential they have. *Nonresidential fathers*, the current term commonly used for fathers not living in the primary household with their children, seems to be a welcomed improvement over previous terms like *absent fathers*, which suggested they were not in contact with their children; *visiting fathers*, which implied they simply visit with their children without assuming any responsibilities; and *noncustodial fathers*, which emphasizes something they do not have, legal obligations for their children. However, the term *nonresidential fathers* also has obvious limitations as it implies that the children of these fathers do not reside at all with them, which is often untrue. The term also describes what these fathers are *not* rather than what they *are*; it tends not to compliment fathers for what they do. Some possible improvements in terminology could be *active (or inactive) parents*, *secondary parents*, and *part-time parents*, but these terms have obvious limitations as well.

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