

DC Family Policy Seminar

Reconnecting DC Families: Involving Low-Income Fathers in the Lives of Their Children

Seminar Highlights

**Moderator: Mark Carl Rom, Ph.D., Associate Professor
Georgetown University Public Policy Institute, Georgetown University**

Introduction

In 1998, 58 percent of District of Columbia (DC) children were living in homes without a father. Although not all fathers who live apart from their children are uninvolved in their children's lives, the absence of a father in the home has negative economic as well as psychological consequences for children. Policymakers have usually considered fathers as financial providers and have disregarded the emotional and moral contributions they can make to their children. The DC Family Policy Seminar on fatherhood initiatives was conducted to discuss the advantages of and challenges associated with establishing services for fathers with low incomes and involving them in the lives of their children.

After welcoming participants to the seminar, moderator Mark Rom stated that U.S. policymakers are finally recognizing what should have been obvious all along—that the success of children and families depends substantially on the presence of fathers. Rom noted that a father's involvement with his children and his relationships with them and their mother have great implications for the family. He said that in the past, policymakers paid little attention to the importance of fathers beyond their ability to provide financially for their children. Rom asserted that our culture can no longer think of a father just as a child support check, but as an integral part in nurturing and raising children, and helping boys and girls grow up to be strong men and women.

In the pursuit of “deadbeat dads,” fathers who do not provide financial support to their children, Rom said that policymakers have ignored the millions of “dead broke dads” who want to provide for their children but lack the economic means or skills to do so. Rom asserted that a strategy is needed to ensure that all fathers are able to help support their children financially. He explained that the panel of experts assembled for this seminar would discuss (a) ways the states and the District of Columbia are attempting to engage fathers who are financially and emotionally disengaged from their children, (b) the challenges in establishing programs to reconnect low-income fathers with their children, and (c) the many challenges in designing, implementing, and evaluating these programs.

Tamara Halle, Research Associate, Child Trends

Tamara Halle reviewed research documenting how a father's absence affects children and reviewed theory suggesting that there are many ways that fathers can have a positive impact on their children's lives. Halle stated that positive paternal involvement is more than the father's physical presence in the home or his provision of financial support. Halle suggested that the

definition of “responsible fatherhood” be expanded to include positive physical contact, emotional support, and caregiving.

Impact of Absent Fathers on Children

Halle noted that in 1997, 24 percent of children in the United States lived with their mothers only. She discussed research indicating that children who have infrequent or inconsistent contact with their fathers are at higher risk for many negative outcomes, such as poverty. During the last 30 years, the median income of households headed by women has been consistently less than 35 percent of the median income of two-parent households. Children growing up in households headed by a single woman are five times more likely than children in two-parent households to live in poverty. Children whose parents are divorced or whose parents never married are more likely than children in two-parent households to use alcohol and drugs, become teen parents, or drop out of school. Boys whose fathers are absent are twice as likely as boys in two-parent households to be incarcerated, regardless of their parents’ education level, race/ethnicity, and income. Children growing up in two-parent households are more likely to get better grades and to have fewer behavior problems than children from single-parent households. Halle stated that these findings suggest that children “do better” when they grow up with two parents in the home.

Promotion of Marriage

Halle stated that these findings have clear policy implications and can be used to support initiatives to promote marriage, but that these results need to be viewed in light of three important caveats. First, not all two-parent households are conflict free, and research shows that children suffer when they are exposed to a lot of parental conflict. Consequently, if policymakers want to promote marriage, they might also want to support services to help married couples live together harmoniously. Second, research involving two-parent households does not always distinguish between biological parents and stepparents. Given the growing rates of divorce and remarriage, children living in two-parent households today may not be living with both biological parents. Halle asserted that more research is needed to compare the well-being of children growing up with two biological parents with that of children growing up in households with stepparents. Finally, and perhaps the most important caveat, is that even though differences have been found between two-parent and single-parent households, the statistical differences between these groups are typically moderate to small. Therefore, a child who grows up in a single-parent household is not necessarily going to lead an unsuccessful life.

National Fatherhood Policies

Halle noted that some federal policies concerning fathers and their relationships with their children include the establishment of paternity and the payment of child support. The Welfare Reform Act has specific provisions to enforce child support collection as an alternative source of financial support for households headed by women with low incomes. Halle cautioned that these policies diminish the importance of fathers by viewing them only as sources of financial support.

Paternal Involvement

Halle outlined three components of paternal involvement: (1) accessibility, (2) engagement, and (3) responsibility. Accessibility refers to the extent of a father’s presence and availability to his child. Engagement indicates a father’s involvement in shared activities with his child, such as caregiving, play, and leisure activities. Responsibility refers to the father’s involvement in

providing for his child's needs and planning and organizing the child's life. Halle explained that providing for a child's needs goes beyond providing financial support and includes providing food, clothing, shelter, health care, tuition, and child care. Paternal involvement that includes all three components can have a positive impact on a child's developmental outcome.

In terms of accessibility, Halle explained that nonresident fathers tend to stay in touch with their children during the first few years of the children's lives; however, this interaction drops off as children get older. Two national studies have found that only 20 percent of unmarried fathers visit their school-age children at least once a year, even though the majority have close contact during the children's first 2 years. Research results are mixed about whether nonresident father-child contact has a positive, negative, or null effect on a child's well-being. These discrepancies may result from inadequate measures of father-child contact, particularly measures that define positive and negative interactions.

Regarding responsibility, Halle stated that noncustodial fathers have historically not met their financial responsibilities to their children. However, nonresident fathers who have visitation rights or joint custody are more likely than those with neither visitation nor custody rights to pay some or all of their children's support. Studies indicate that child support is more beneficial to children if the child support agreement is reached cooperatively between parents, rather than established through a court order. Halle noted that these findings suggest that nonresident fathers who are able to maintain accessibility to, and engagement with, their children are more likely to fulfill their financial responsibilities to their children.

Halle explained that many low-income, nonresident fathers do not provide financial support through the formal child support enforcement system, but contribute "in kind" support such as food, clothing, and toys for their children. Low-income fathers can also support their children by taking them child for medical care or by attending school functions. Most studies have not distinguished among divorced, separated, and never-married fathers. Halle noted that researchers have found that nonresident fathers, as a group, are usually less involved with their children than resident fathers.

Halle stated that a father's ability or willingness to be a responsible and involved father is influenced by many factors, including socioeconomic status, employment status and work schedule, education level, geography and transportation, timing of parenthood, and the father's relationship with the mother. Research indicates that many low-income nonresident fathers may limit their involvement with their children because they feel that if they cannot provide for their children financially, they cannot be involved with them in other ways. This suggests, Halle explained, that low-income fathers, whether married or not, may be more likely to stay involved with their children if they develop a broader definition of what it means to be a father. She asserted that all fathers, regardless of economic background, need to be physically present and emotionally supportive of their children.

Halle explained that the relationship between the mother and father is key, whether the two are married or not. Within marriage, a good husband-wife relationship is predictive of greater paternal participation in child care activities. Similar findings are reported for cohabiting couples. If the mother and father are not married and are not living together (as is the case with

divorced and never-married couples), research indicates that the mother often acts as a gatekeeper to the child, and regulates contact between the father and child, using financial or other criteria. A study of low-income single mothers indicates that a mother will allow contact between the child and father if the mother views the father as a potential financial provider. Halle stated that these research findings, as well as the ones mentioned earlier, have policy implications for fatherhood initiatives.

Policy Implications

Halle noted that research suggests that the higher a father's education or income level, the more likely he is to support his child financially and to be involved in his child's life. This is true regardless of whether the father is living with or apart from his child. Halle explained that one policy implication of these findings is that the quantity and the quality of father-child interactions may be increased by investing in the educational and vocational training of fathers. She asserted that increasing men's earning capacity will make them better able to support their children financially, and may make it more likely that mothers will allow nonresident fathers to be involved in the children's lives in other important ways.

A child's well-being is not guaranteed even within a two-parent household, Halle stated. Multiple stressors, including financial burdens and parental conflict, can negatively affect a child's development. She said that policymakers may want to look at the costs and benefits of including marriage or couples counseling and family therapy under medical benefits, and suggested that revising the tax code to reduce the marriage penalty may encourage marriage among cohabiting couples, and raise family incomes.

Halle concluded that there is still more to be learned about fathers and their influence on children's development and that more research is needed.

Wade F. Horn, President, National Fatherhood Initiative

Wade Horn opened his presentation with an anecdote. He co-founded the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) 6 years ago and scheduled a forum in Los Angeles, California, to discuss the importance of fathers and the positive contributions they make to their children. NFI sent out nearly 4,000 flyers and expected a large crowd, on the assumption that because NFI cared about fathers everyone did. The forum was to begin at 9:00a.m., but at 9:20 only four people were in attendance. Regardless, Horn said he began his presentation and halfway through, two participants left, stating they had wandered into the wrong meeting. Horn stated that if, during his presentation at this seminar, the audience did not dwindle in half, he would be rather pleased.

NFI was started in 1994 to improve the well-being of children by increasing the number of children growing up with involved, committed, and responsible fathers, Horn explained. At that time, however, few believed that fathers mattered beyond their ability to provide financial support. Only in the last few years has the broader culture begun to support the assertion that fathers matter in other ways. Horn discussed the new consensus that fathers provide something that is unique and, in many ways, irreplaceable to their children, and voiced his concern that more needs to be done to promote this consensus.

Public Education

Horn stated his belief that society needs to change its view of fathers, and one way to achieve this is through public education campaigns emphasizing how fathers contribute to their children's well-being, and the dire consequences to children when their fathers are absent. Horn showed several NFI public service television advertisements and explained how NFI had shaped its fatherhood message. Five years ago, when NFI was new, the organization's advertisements depicted human fathers, and NFI received some negative reactions. Some women interpreted these advertisements as implying that mothers were not important, while some divorced and unwed fathers interpreted these messages, as implying it was their fault. Consequently, NFI created a series of advertisements called the "Nature of Fatherhood," which showed animal fathers with their young. He commented that NFI is again producing advertisements depicting people, because society is now more accepting of the fatherhood movement, and to date, more than \$100 million in air time has been donated by television and radio stations.

Horn was pleased to say that public education has made a difference. The increased public awareness of the importance of fathers has translated into fatherhood programs all over the United States. Horn explained that when he started NFI in 1994, he could barely find 200 fatherhood programs. He reported that well over 2,000 such programs exist today, and they are springing up everywhere.

Fatherhood Programs

Horn explained that the key to working with married fathers who live with their children is twofold: (1) work with them early and emphasize the importance of providing emotional as well as financial support to their children and (2) incorporate a marriage component in fatherhood programs to help keep marriages strong. Horn asserted that children benefit not only from "married fatherhood," but also from married fatherhood in which the marriage is mutually satisfying to both partners. He noted that the key to working with divorced fathers is to recognize that they are more likely than unwed fathers to pay child support and to be involved in custody battles. Programs for divorced fathers need to emphasize paternal involvement through access and visitation. Finally, regarding unmarried fathers, Horn commented that many have low incomes. The key is to work with these fathers early, get them connected with their children and, where appropriate, help them get jobs. Horn cautioned that establishing paternity at the hospital where the child is born can go very wrong. Word could quickly circulate that this is yet another trap for fathers. There are reports, for example, that in the District of Columbia there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of fathers attending the births of their children because of this policy. Horn asserted that programs for unmarried fathers with low incomes must combine an in-hospital paternity program with support services to let fathers know that "we are on their side."

Horn emphasized the importance of being supportive of the father because, ultimately, "If we are on the side of the father, we are on the side of the child." The mission of NFI, Horn stated, is not necessarily to make fathers feel good, but to improve the well-being of children by increasing the number of children growing up with responsible fathers. He said that children win when both parents are involved. Last October the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Fathers Count Act of 1999, which will provide funding for (a) improving the parenting skills of married and unmarried fathers, (b) improving the employment level of married and unmarried fathers, and (c) promoting strong, stable, and equitable marriages. The Senate is reviewing a version of this bill,

called the Responsible Fatherhood Act. Horn suggested that audience members could contact their senators to express support for this important legislation.

DeCasto Brown, Male Outreach Supervisor, DC Healthy Start

DeCasto Brown opened his presentation by providing an overview of the DC Healthy Start (DCHS) Male Outreach Worker (MOW) program. DCHS addresses the physical, emotional, and socioeconomic needs of fathers and potential fathers residing in Wards 5, 6, 7, and 8. MOW promotes the concept that fathers can and do play an important role in the healthy birth and development of their children. Brown explained that this role is key to the successful establishment and growth of the family and that the role of a father before, during, and after pregnancy extends beyond his physical presence. DCHS provides case management for all MOW participants.

Brown explained that each participating father must fill in an intake form, which helps allow DCHS collect information on each father to better assess their needs. The form asks for information on the father's relationship with the mother, marital status, drug use, support system, health information, employment history, and education. This information enables DCHS to determine the level of involvement the father can offer the child and helps determine how to support the father. The final question on the form, the most important one according to Brown, asks the father to list what he wants to get out of the program.

Brown stated that MOW and the father work together to develop a Personal Development Plan (PDP). MOW maps out a strategy to help the father improve his circumstances through employment, education, and instruction in parenting skills. Each father must sign his PDP and make a written commitment to follow the outlined steps. All fathers must participate in at least 80 percent of the fatherhood curriculum, which includes male-female relationships and communication, male sexuality, self-esteem, decisions and their consequences, racism, power and control in relationships, male parenting, and family health. Fathers must also participate in support groups. Brown acknowledged that getting the men to attend and participate in support groups has been a tremendous challenge.

Brown concluded his presentation with statistical data. Federal funding requires DCHS to make data on MOW participants available. Brown presented a chart showing that 32.6 percent of new fathers enrolled in the program live with partners and 67.4 percent live without partners. Brown also presented the percentage of referrals made to the program by type: 19.3 percent of MOW participants are referred for employment training, 38.5 percent for employment services, 11.2 percent for education services, 18.5 percent for counseling services, and 12.4 percent for substance abuse services.

Christine Hart-Wright, Executive Director, STRIVE DC

Christine Hart-Wright began her presentation by posing a question. She asked audience members how they could get something into a glass jar without opening it. When no one supplied the answer, she reminded the audience that the only way to get something into the jar is to open it. She then asked audience members to open their minds to STRIVE (Support and Training Results

in Valuable Employees), a program that helps noncustodial parents obtain employment.

STRIVE DC's grant is with the Department of Health and Human Services and the DC Department of Employment Services. The DC Office of Paternity and Child Support, U.S. Department of Labor, and STRIVE established STRIVE DC, a 3-week intensive program that teaches participants how to obtain and maintain employment. Hart-Wright commented that STRIVE is a difficult program that is not for everyone.

Hart-Wright showed an excerpt from a 1985 *60 Minutes* episode that focused on the STRIVE program in New York City. The program began in New York City in 1985 and is now in a number of cities across the country. STRIVE is part boot camp, part group therapy. Anyone who is living in poverty and unemployed is eligible. The *60 Minutes* episode emphasized a key component of STRIVE, that attitude keeps people from getting and keeping jobs. Hart-Wright stated that the "victim mentality" is not tolerated at STRIVE.

After showing the *60 Minutes* episode, Hart-Wright explained that anyone who wants to participate in STRIVE DC must be drug- and alcohol-free for 60 days before beginning the program. Individuals who are not drug- and alcohol-free are referred for treatment. Individuals who complete the STRIVE program are eligible for lifetime STRIVE benefits and can obtain assistance from any STRIVE location. Hart-Wright explained that preparing noncustodial fathers for employment helps them begin to support their children.

Questions and Answers

Q: How are people referred to DC Healthy Start and STRIVE DC?

A: DCHS receives referrals from pregnant Healthy Start participants, junior high schools, high schools, and the courts, to name a few. Interested individuals should call (202) 645-0415, and within 24 hours a Male Outreach Worker will contact the person.

DeCasto Brown

A: STRIVE DC receives referrals from DC Superior Court through child support court orders. That is how we get noncustodial parents. Any unemployed person who walks in our office can participate.

Chris Hart-Wright

Q: When will DC Healthy Start begin serving fathers in Ward 4, and to what extent is DCHS connected to fathers in schools?

Jan Smith, DC Schools

A: DCHS is not funded to serve fathers in Ward 4. DCHS is only funded and mandated to work with fathers in Wards 5, 6, 7, and 8. If DCHS works in the other wards, the data collected is not usable. DCHS is working with counselors in Miner Elementary, Eastern, and Phelps schools. The counselors in those schools decided they wanted to address teen fathers and called us.

DeCasto Brown

Q: Is there research showing a correlation between opposite-gender hate and attitudes toward marriage?

Yvonne Keyes, Children's Advocate

A: If the fatherhood movement is going to be successful, it will be successful because it will emphasize reconciliation between men and women, between the races, and between different faith traditions. An assertion of “men first” or “fathers first” will only feed into the anger and distance that has come between men and women. I hope that the work we do emphasizes the notion of reconciliation as well as the rights of fathers.

Wade Horn

A: I would also add that research shows that conflict between parents, whether they are married or not, has a negative impact on children. Children benefit most when there is cooperation between parents, even if it is not within marriage.

Tamara Halle

Q: There seems to be a need for a program to address the court system, where children involved in child abuse and neglect issues really are in need of both parents in their lives. How can we get judges more involved?

Maureen Murphy, Georgetown Public Policy Institute

A: The judges know about STRIVE DC. My experience with child support has armed me with the ability to provide help to participants in dealing with issues of custody and visitation. I help direct participants to where they can get help with these issues. Oftentimes noncustodial parents aren't there, not because they don't want to be there but because they don't know how to be there. The child support program in the District of Columbia is adversarial, as is every program through the court. There is a need to gather resources together to help these families in these situations.

Christine Hart-Wright

A: It is self-evident that judges, like the rest of us, are influenced by the culture. If we have a culture that doesn't think fathers matter, why should we expect that judges would think any differently? If we think that a father's worth is only in sending a check, why should we expect judges to think differently? The first step is to change the perception of a father's worth so that judges realize that fatherhood is about more than money. We should educate judges on the use of mediation services and coparenting services in cases of divorce, as opposed to the current system where mothers and fathers fight it out and whoever is still standing gets the kid. After going through that ordeal, why should we expect that these two parents will work together in the best interest of the child? It doesn't make sense. Even if the marriage is over, the woman is still the mother and the man is still the father of the child, and together they must develop a plan to care for this child. In the case of unwed fathers, the court needs to do a better job in realizing that the child needs more than a child support check from Dad. All of this requires changes in the law, as well as changes in the views of judges. Laws must change to encourage a support system for fathers and not just punish them.

Wade Horn

Commentary: A recent demonstration project called Parent Fair Share attempted to help fathers who were having problems with child support payments. The project provided job training and support services to fathers and found that this kind of program helped fathers pay some of their child support payments. However, the job training they got helped them get jobs, but not to keep them. A recommendation from this demonstration project was that these fathers needed job training but also help in sustaining long-term employment.

Tamara Halle

Commentary: Parent Fair Share was not successful in improving child support payment rates. Men had a choice of going to jail or participating in this program. What we learned is that fatherhood programs need to start earlier before the mother-father relationship deteriorates and child support arrearages have built up.

Wade Horn

Q: I am trying to network fathers into a neighborhood organization. Do you have any suggestions on how to get people to come in?

Raymond Coates, North Capital Family Collaborative

A: DCHS is basically a referral service. I am constantly having meetings to learn about new programs. The greatest problem we had 4 to 5 years ago was with outreach. The problem with outreach efforts is that a lot of guys are fearful that you want something in return for the services that you offer. You must commit yourself to canvassing the entire community until people get to know what you are really about and what you have to offer them. Don't feel bad they aren't coming in, just keep selling. Sell your program the same way that the guy on the street sells dope—make it attractive. The day you say you don't feel like selling your program today, then you are going to lose. If you keep selling, eventually one guy will check it out and once he gets in, he will go back and tell everyone else. When we began our support groups we had no one show up for the first few weeks. Now we have on average 15 to 20 guys attend our support groups.

DeCasto Brown

Commentary: For us to get 25 people to come into a class, I have to reach 300 to 400 people that month. Of that number, approximately 75 usually fill out an application and 25 will show up for the 3-week session and maybe 18 will actually graduate.

Christine Hart-Wright

Q: My first question is whether or not there is a policy on the horizon that addresses noncustodial parents to receive a tax exemption or tax credit for being financially involved with child. My second question is about programs in the prison population.

Alonzo Davis, Community and Family Life Services

A: No, there are no tax credits. It's usually "get tough on deadbeat dads." It's a long road to get there; I don't see it happening any time soon. One positive sign is the Fathers Count Act, which will provide \$150 million in funds to community-based programs to offer resources to fathers.

Wade Horn

A: As part of welfare reform, some noncustodial fathers are being included in TANF-eligible [Temporary Aid to Needy Families] job-related services. It's up to the state to include fathers in TANF-eligible services. Currently, 17 states are using funds to include noncustodial fathers, some states are using their own funds to include fathers, and 22 states have no plans to do either.
Tamara Halle

A: Two years ago we ran a program at Lorton prison. However, we had transportation problems, and whenever we got there to hold curriculum meetings, the prisoners would be on lockdown. We did better with clients incarcerated at the DC jail because Lorton had too many restrictions and there were no transportation issues [in getting to the DC jail].
DeCasto Brown

A: Participating in STRIVE DC must be voluntary. Our program works only when people are there because they want to be there.
Christine Hart-Wright

Q: How do we empower Latino fathers and other minority fathers to be better fathers?
Maria Diaz, Early Head Start Home Visitor

A: We need to expand in this area. STRIVE DC is desperately trying to reach this population. Our trainer now speaks Spanish, but we are hoping to hire a Hispanic person.
Christine Hart-Wright

Q: Is there a particular role for state and federal efforts? I see a lot of localized efforts.
Tim Harrison, American Public Human Services Association

A: NFI has formed a bipartisan governors task force on fatherhood promotion. To date, 18 governors have signed on. It operates through NFI and works in conjunction with the National Governors Association. We have helped to stimulate a lot of activity at the state level. Currently, we are operating statewide fatherhood initiatives in Virginia, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin. Governors have a lot of money that could be used for fatherhood programming, such as the TANF block grant. But for some reason a lot of governors are reluctant to spend that money on fatherhood initiatives. We should push the idea that you can use TANF money to work with fathers.
Wade Horn

Q: Are you looking just to help fathers get back into the lives of their children, or are you also attempting to work with significant others?

A: In our particular program, 20 to 30 percent of the men are not the biological fathers of the child or children in the household. If the man is living in the household, he is eligible for our services.
DeCasto Brown

Commentary: I wanted to let everyone know about the new Teen Parent Assessment Project at

the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. We make home and field visits to women who receive TANF benefits. I just want to emphasize that we need to work on prevention because too many of our boys and girls are becoming fathers and mothers at too young of an age.
Henry Jones, Teen Parent Assessment Program