

Fathers' roles in strengthening families:  
Testimony before the National Family Strengths Project

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Washington, D.C.

June 12, 1986

## INTRODUCTION

The interest of this committee in the role of the father in promoting healthy families is a welcome event. Too little attention has been given this question by researchers, practitioners, journalists, and policy makers. These hearings provide an opportunity to assess what is known in this area and to encourage researchers, practitioners, and the Congress to place greater importance on understanding the ways in which fathers can and do contribute to family strengths.

What role do fathers have in strengthening families? In responding to this question of the father's role, I would like to draw primarily on a series of analyses that has been based on the National Survey of Children. This survey, supported in part by Federal grants, is a longitudinal study of a representative sample of U.S. children covering the years from middle childhood to adolescence. The representativeness of the sample is important, because it means that results of the analyses can be generalized to all U.S. children of the same age range at the times of the survey.

The survey was first conducted in 1976-1977, at which time 2301 children aged 7 through 11 were interviewed. Data were collected through personal interviews with the child, and with the parent most knowledgeable about the child, and through questionnaires sent to the children's teachers. The second

survey was conducted in 1981 and was based on a subsample of the children, by then aged 11 through 16. The same methods of data collection were used. By collecting data from three independent sources -- the children themselves, their parents, and their teachers -- a more complete and rounded picture of children and their families was obtained.

#### FAMILY FORMS

Families come in many forms. The actual and potential roles of fathers are correspondingly varied. Because the roles of fathers vary by family type, it is not possible to speak of the role of the father in any singular way. Rather we must consider the father's roles in relation to the kind of family of which he is a part. Two broad and common types need to be distinguished. First is the intact, two-parent family -- families in which children are living with both biological parents or two adoptive parents. The majority of children live in such families although, as you are no doubt aware, the proportion in such families has declined considerably in recent years. For example, in 1970, 85 percent of children under 18 lived with two parents. This had declined to 75 percent by 1982. Of the 75 percent, 63 percent lived with both biological parents, and 2 percent lived with two adoptive parents. The other 10 percent lived in reconstituted families having a biological parent and a step parent. (Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families, 1983.)

Not all intact families are alike, however. The father's roles may vary according to such factors as the presence of grandparents in the home, whether the parents are in their teens or in their forties, the employment patterns of husband and wife, and the number and ages of the children in the family.

The second broad type is the disrupted family, usually one in which the child is living with the biological mother but not the father. Though they may live apart, fathers continue to have the potential to be involved in the family and the lives of their children. Many do. Many more could do so. This broad type also has many variations. In some families, a marriage has never taken place; in others, separation or divorce has led to a single-parent family of residence; in still others, the remarriage of the custodial parent has led to the return to a two-parent residential family, and possibly the addition of step siblings or half siblings. In 1981, for example, 18 percent of children were living with a biological mother, but no father, 7 percent were living with a biological mother and a substitute father (step, foster, or adoptive), and 2 percent were living with neither biological parent. In addition, 3 percent were living with their biological father, but not their biological mother. (Child Trends, 1986.)

There are, of course, children in family forms other than intact or disrupted families. For example, some children live in foster homes, in group quarters, in institutions, and, among

older children, live on their own in independent households. Though the numbers in such situations are relatively small, the role of fathers for these special populations deserves separate consideration.

#### THE FATHER'S ROLE IN NON-INTACT FAMILIES

I will turn first to the consideration of fathers' roles in non-intact families; specifically, families in which the mother has physical custody, and the father is the absent parent. For such families, I would like to emphasize three roles that seem to me to be especially critical: providing economic support for the family; participating in child care and other childrearing functions; and maintaining a good relationship with the children.

Poverty among children has risen sharply in the last decade. One of the leading circumstances associated with childhood poverty is living in a mother-only household. In fact, the event of a separation or divorce is often what precipitates a spell of poverty for children and their mothers. Clearly one of the primary roles of absent fathers is to continue to see that their children enjoy an adequate level of financial support.

Unfortunately, the proportion of absent fathers who provide support is low; and the level of support, for those who do provide it, is also low. According to data from the April, 1984

Current Population Survey, less than half of the women living with children from an absent father were supposed to receive support in 1983, and less than half of these received the full support to which they were entitled by a support award or agreement. (See Table 1.) The average level of support, for those women who did receive support in 1983, was only \$2,341. Moreover, this level was a decline from the average level for 1978, which was \$2,746 when measured in constant (1983) dollars. Data from the National Survey of Children taken from the point of view of the children themselves show a similar picture. Only 42 percent of children aged 11 to 16 living in a family having an absent father had child support payments sent to their mother in their behalf. The average level of support among recipients was \$2,291. Furthermore, we found that the average level of support paid declined sharply with the time that had passed since the separation or divorce. (See Table 2.) This decline may be attributed to three factors: the failure to provide for adjustments to awards to take inflation into account, a decline in the proportion of fathers paying any support at all, and a decrease in the actual amount paid by fathers who did pay.

The second role absent fathers could more effectively play is that of participating in childrearing. The mothers of 75 percent of the children in the National Survey of Children reported that the absent father took too little responsibility in rearing the child. (See Table 3.) The mothers of 67 percent said that they rarely or never discuss matters concerning the

child with the outside father. As a consequence, the fathers of 73 percent of these children are reported by the mothers to have very little or no influence on decisions about the child. Clearly, there is both room for considerably more participation by the father and the desire of a majority of the mothers of these children to have that greater paternal participation.

While some aspects of childrearing can be done behind the scenes, such as making decisions about the child, or providing opportunities or resources, developing a strong, positive relationship with the child requires actual contact, the third role that absent fathers can play. In this area too there is plenty of room for improvement. Based on data from the National Survey, only one in six 11 to 16 year old children with absent fathers saw their father as often as weekly (52 times or more during the year -- see Table 4). Another sixth saw them at least monthly, and another sixth at least once during the year. This leaves half of the children who had not seen their fathers at all in the past year; and two-thirds of these either had no contact in the last five years, or didn't even know whether the father was living.

Contact between father and child can take on many forms and patterns. The child can spend nights at the father's house; they can talk on the telephone; they can correspond by mail. The child can spend extended periods of time -- such as a week or more -- at the father's home. As a result of the frequency

and pattern of contact, the child develops a sense that the home of the absent father is also the child's home. Yet by all these measures (see Table 5), the level of contact between father and child is much less than it could be. In a typical month, according to the reports of children in the National Survey, only 45 percent talk to their father on the telephone, 36 percent actually see their fathers, 20 percent sleep at his home, and only 7 percent receive a letter from him. Only 22 percent feel that their father's home is like their own home; 58 percent have never even been in it. Moreover, as the time since separation increases, even these minimal levels of contact decline. Fathers with so little involvement in the lives of their children can hardly contribute much to their rearing, or develop positive relationships with them.

Some have argued that the less fathers participate in family life following separation and divorce, the better for the children. There is some merit to this claim. Certainly, when there is no contact, there is no opportunity for conflict; disagreements between former spouses about childrearing will not arise; the child will not be placed in the awkward position of a go-between.

On balance, however, the data from the National Survey suggest that a continued father-child relationship is important. For example, the amount of child support paid is strongly positively related to the level of contact. Over 70 percent of

children who see their fathers as often as 12 times in a year receive support payments in their behalf, and the average payment is around \$2,500. In contrast, only 15 percent who have not seen their fathers in 5 years receive child support, and the average amount for those who do is only \$1,600. (See Table 2.) Furthermore, a positive relationship with the father as well as with the mother can help ameliorate some of the negative effects on children of separation and divorce. According to data from the National Survey, 70 percent of children 11 to 16 in intact families have a positive relationship with their mothers; and 67 percent, with their fathers. For children living with their mothers only, the corresponding percentages are 60 and 36. Clearly, the absence of the father takes a toll on the father-child relationship. This relationship, in turn, is quite strongly related to a number of child behaviors. Both boys and girls fared best when they had a positive relationship with both parents. Having a good relationship with only one parent was not nearly as good, and having a good relationship with neither was usually the worst possible pattern. (See Table 6.) This pattern of relationships held equally well among children in intact and in mother-only families. The difference is that fewer of the children in mother-only families are close to both parents.

## THE ROLE OF FATHERS IN INTACT FAMILIES

Now I would like to turn my attention to children living in families with both their biological or adoptive parents. Here I would like to raise a set of overlapping themes. Namely, a father in such a family can contribute to the well-being of his children in at least three ways: he can establish and maintain a harmonious relationship with his wife; he can share in the childrearing and child care responsibilities with his wife, and thus support her in her relationship with their children; and he can work to develop his own positive relationship with his children. By emphasizing these themes, especially the first two, I also want to point out that the father's role vis-a-vis the child cannot be examined in isolation from the larger family context in which it is set. The father's relationship with the child, and the effect of that relationship on the child's behavior and well-being depend in part on other family factors, such as parental conflict, patterns of employment of the parents, and economic circumstances, among other factors.

Marriages characterized by prolonged high conflict are especially difficult for children. Data from the National Survey of Children show that high conflict in intact families is as detrimental as separation or divorce. Indeed, for some behaviors, persistent high conflict is more harmful. Our data suggest that if a stable family living arrangement can be established after the disruption of a marriage, the negative

effects of the disruption on the children diminish with time. But if conflict in an intact family persists, the consequences for children's mental health and behavior also persist. For example, boys living in mother-only families are one-third of a standard deviation above the mean on a measure of depression/withdrawal, while those living in families with recent high conflict are equally above the mean, and those in families with persistent high conflict are over one-half a standard deviation above the mean. Similarly, boys in mother-only families are three-tenths of a standard deviation above the mean on a measure of antisocial behavior, while those in families with persistent high conflict are nearly eight-tenths of a standard deviation above the mean. Similarly striking findings can be shown for girls. (See Table 7.)

Some have suggested that children can be protected from the harmful effects of parental conflict by keeping conflict from their view. Data from the National Survey do not support this contention. The correlations between measures of conflict and several measures of child outcomes are strong even among those children who report that their parents seem to get along very well. Thus conflict between parents may affect the child's behavior not only through direct exposure, but also indirectly, perhaps by affecting the quality of the parent-child relationships, or the quality of childrearing the parents provide. Though such data force one to acknowledge that a break-up is not always the worst alternative, they do not

necessarily represent a case in favor of divorce. Such data do, however, argue for the importance of resolving family problems, since it is clear that children's outcomes tend to be best in two-parent low-conflict families.

A second way in which fathers can improve the family environment for their children is by participating fully in childrearing tasks, including child care. When questions were asked in the survey about who takes responsibility for various childrearing tasks, such as making sure that the child does his or her homework, attending school conferences, and the like, the mother was more likely to be involved than was the father. Also, the mother usually proved to be the better informed respondent about the child when it came to such topics as health history and school performance.

Although most mothers felt that both they and their spouses took about the right amount of responsibility in raising the child, mothers were much more likely to feel that they themselves took too much rather than too little responsibility, and to say that their husbands took too little rather than too much. As more mothers, especially mothers of young children, participate in the labor force, and do so for longer periods of time, there is clearly a need for fathers to take on a greater share of the child care responsibilities.

Greater sharing of such responsibilities cannot be considered in isolation from other factors, of course. If greater sharing leads to more parental conflict over how to rear the child, or if the parents are inconsistent in their childrearing practices, the benefits of greater participation by the father may be undermined by the attendant costs. However, some data suggest that sharing the functions of teaching, monitoring, and disciplining the child may well increase the effectiveness of both parents. Lytton, for example (1979, as cited in Lamb, 1981) found that mothers' attempts to control their young children were more effective when fathers were present.

The third role I want to emphasize for fathers in intact families is similar to one for absent fathers; namely, to work toward building a strong, positive relationship with their children. The data I discussed earlier (see Table 6) showed that for all children, both those in intact families and those with an absent parent, having a positive relationship with both parents is better than having a positive relationship with only one parent. To explore the meaning of this finding in more detail let us look at the items that make up our measure of the parent-child relationship.

Children were asked to rate their parents (mother and father separately) on four items: whether the parent gave them enough affection; how frequently the child and parent did things together; how close the child felt to the parent; and how much

they wanted to be like the parent when they were grown. On affection and closeness, children rated their mothers more favorably than their fathers; but on doing things together and wanting to be like the parent, fathers were slightly more favorably evaluated.

Each of these items, for both mothers and fathers, is consistently associated with a range of outcomes for children such that the better the relationship with the parent, the better the outcome. For example, children who get all the affection they want from either parent are least likely to exhibit hyperactive, antisocial, or depressed/withdrawn behavior; to be delinquent (as reported by the child, the parent, or by the teacher); or to show signs of psychological distress (as reported by the child or parent); and they are most likely to report satisfaction with their lives.

While the associations between these parent-child relationship items and child outcomes are generally the same for fathers as for mothers, some interesting differences are suggested by the data. Most of the associations are stronger when closeness to mothers is considered than when closeness to fathers is considered. To illustrate with the item on closeness, children who are extremely close to their mother do better than those who are extremely close to their father, whereas those who are not at all close to their mother do worse than those who are not at all close to their father. So in

general, a mother's relationship with the child can do more for the child -- for better or for worse -- than can a father's relationship.

Looking at the items for the mothers and fathers separately, it appears that getting enough affection from the mother is the most important of the four items in the mother-child relationship. That is, this item is most strongly associated with a variety of child outcomes. For the father, on the other hand, all of the items are more nearly equal in importance.

These differences between mothers and fathers are slight and should not be exaggerated in importance. What is clear and should be emphasized is that while mother-child relationships are crucial, it is also the case that the child's behavior and mental health are improved to the extent that the father-child relationship is better in each of the areas measured by these items; that the father's relationship with the child is important independent of the mother's relationship; and that the most favorable situation is when the child maintains a good relationship with both parents in these areas.

## CONCLUSIONS

What policy conclusions can be drawn from these results? Let me first distinguish between public and private policy. By private policy I mean actions that private individuals and

organizations -- as contrasted with governmental bodies (Federal, state, and local) -- can take to strengthen the role of the father in families. Certainly there is much in the data I have presented that would be food for thought for fathers and that they might want to take into consideration as they raise their children and even before they have children . And counselors and other practitioners might also find useful insights in these data.

Since this hearing is attended by members of a House committee and other Federal officials, it seems appropriate to focus on public policy at the Federal level. Here I suggest a number of actions that might be taken. For disrupted families, I would recommend a continuation and strengthening of efforts to enforce child support payments. Adequate financial support for children in disrupted families is perhaps the single most important need for many of these children, and providing such support is an essential part of the father's role. At the same time, however, efforts should be started to achieve custody and visitation agreements that give absent fathers and their children the greatest possible access to each other. The current debate over whether support and visitation should be legally linked in a settlement agreement misses the point, I feel. We are dealing not so much with parents' rights as with children's welfare. And that welfare is enhanced when children receive both adequate financial support and the psychological support of a good, continuing relationship with the father.

For intact families, one of the important policy goals is to find ways to resolve conflicts within families. While in the long run a separation or divorce may be better for a child than continual high conflict between parents, better still is to live in a harmonious intact family. Efforts to reach this goal might include public support for family counseling and mediation services. Public education is another avenue that might be of use not only in reducing family conflict, but also in providing better positive roles for fathers to imitate.

Finally, I would urge continued Federal support for research on children, youth, and families. It is through the accumulation of knowledge based on a combination of basic, applied, and evaluation research that the kind of information this hearing seeks can best be obtained and be available when needed and requested.