



## Better Understanding Fathers: An Overview of U.S. Fatherhood Trends and Common Issues Fathers Face.

By Eliza Lathrop Cook

Fatherhood is a dynamic and complex responsibility. Every father has unique resources, stressors, and experiences, which aid or hinder his parenting efforts. The setting that each father faces differs across several dimensions ranging from differences in family structure (e.g. married, cohabiting, single, or step-fathers) to physical proximity to children (e.g. nonresident, absentee, or incarcerated fathers). Furthermore, every father engages in various levels of involvement with their child(ren)—some fathers may be highly involved in many aspects of their child’s life, providing emotional, social, financial, mental, and physical support, while other fathers may only be able to offer one type of support, or no support at all. Lastly, fathering roles and fatherhood identities have changed over the past decades, which has influenced how men think of fathering and what roles they adopt in the home.

With an estimated 70.1 million fathers in the United States today, many men experience the complexities, joys, and stressors of fatherhood (U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation on Children, 2008). The goal of this research brief is to discuss national fathering trends and ways in which fathering influences children. The brief continues with an overview of various types of fathers and common issues they are likely to face.

### National Fatherhood Trends Over time

Fatherhood, as we know it, is changing. Society’s message about what makes a “good” dad has changed throughout the past several decades. We also see that

**Finding fathers is complicated:  
85% of households below *may*  
include the presence of a  
father, (exception in red).**

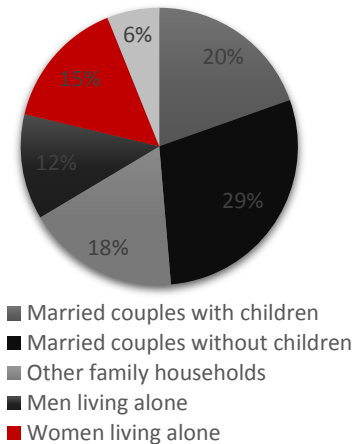


Chart adapted from America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2012 by Jonathan Vespa, Jamie M. Lewis, and Rose M. Kreider

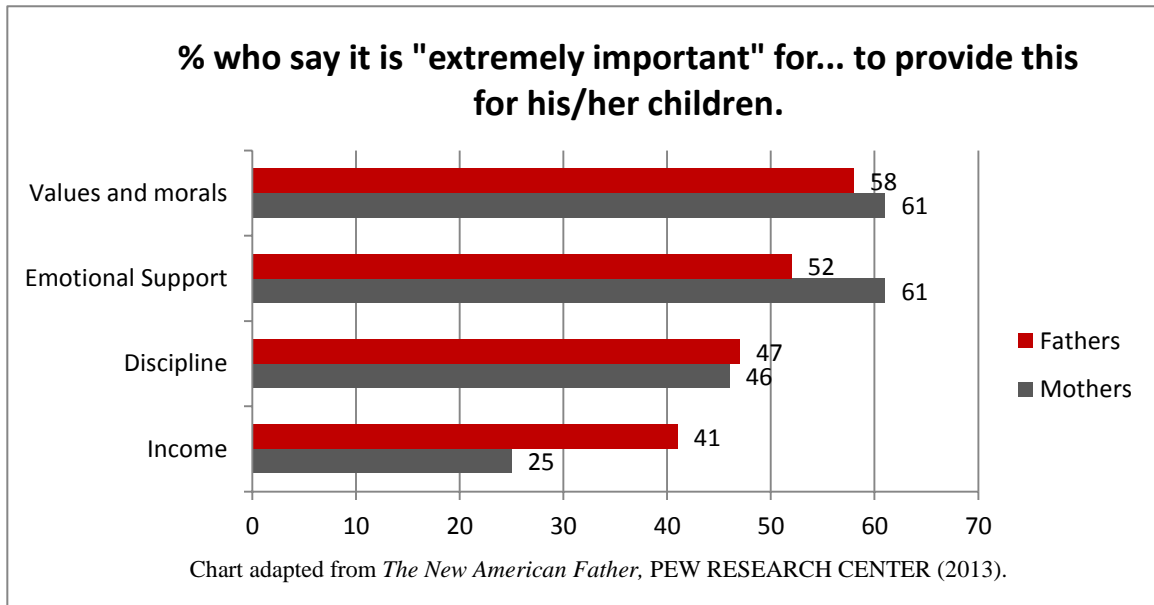
mothers' and fathers' roles are beginning to converge along with the way mothers and fathers spend their time, although some gaps still remain. These national trends play a significant role in how men conceptualize themselves as fathers and experience the daily pressures and joys of fathering.

**How Fatherhood Identity Has Evolved Over Time.** During the colonial period, the primary role of the first Euro-American fathers was as that of a moral teacher for their children (Lamb, 2008). As moral teachers, fathers' primary responsibilities were to teach values and scriptural texts to their children. Fathers were also referred to as the patriarch of the family and as such, could exert an immense amount of dominance and power over their families. However, at the beginning of the 18th century, after the industrialization of America, fathers' roles began to shift as they spent a majority of their time working away from the home. Prior to this period, families often worked together to provide for the needs of family members. After the industrialization, a man's worth was often based on his ability to provide for his family (Lamb, 2008).

More recently, fathers have been introduced to the additional role of nurturer. In the late 1970s, encouraging parenting participation for less involved fathers became a primary focus of national policy makers. Fathers seemed to polarize at either end of the engagement spectrum (e.g., deadbeat dads or very engaged fathers). The engaged father type is now referred to as "the new nurturant father," a term depicting a father who still financially provides for his family, but is also nurturing and emotionally involved as well (Lamb, 2008). Lastly, increases in female labor force participation have also significantly shaped fatherhood roles as men and women renegotiate their parenting roles to accommodate two working parents (Bianchi, 2011).

**Converging Roles of Mothers and Fathers.** As fathers have become more involved in routine childcare activities and mothers have taken a larger role in the workforce, mothers' and fathers' parenting roles have become more similar. A recent study by PEW Research Center surveyed over 1,000 American adults about what necessities were extremely important for mothers and fathers to provide for their children (PEW, *New American Father*, 2013). These four necessities reflect different parenting roles, such as a moral teacher, nurturer, disciplinarian, or economic provider. In the chart below, American adults reported very similar responses between expectations for mothers and fathers for the roles of disciplining and teaching values and morals. Adults in the sample believed that mothers had a greater responsibility to provide emotional support and fathers provide financially for children. However, the differences were slight, and overall adults in this

particular study felt that overall, the roles that mothers and fathers should provide to their children should be fairly similar.

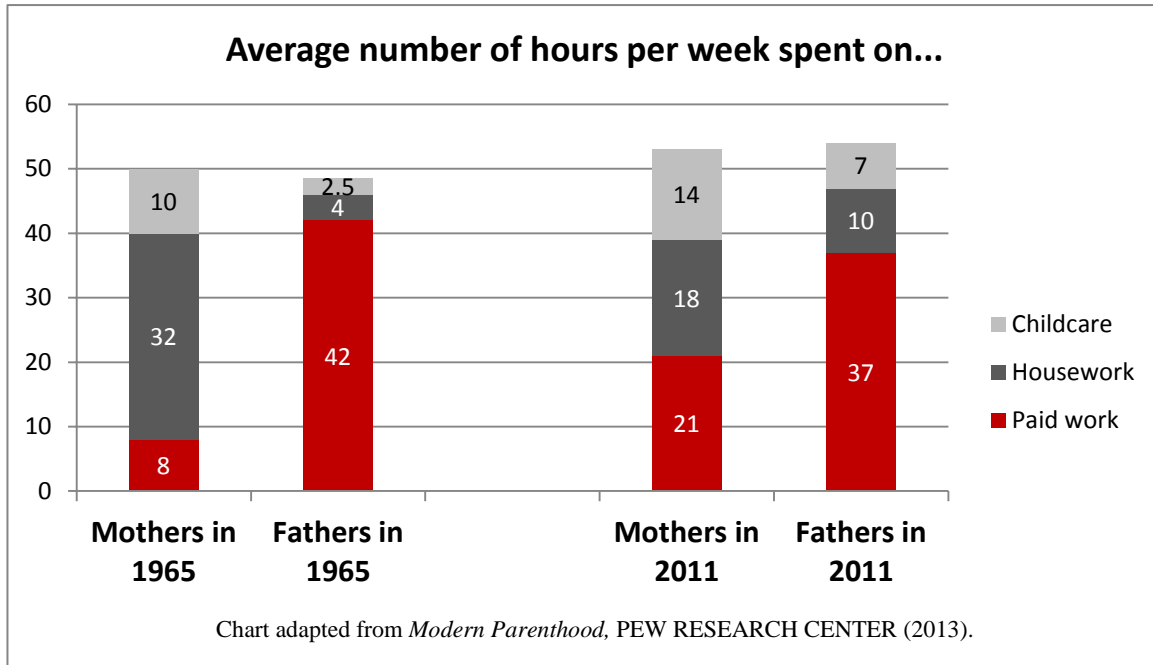


Furthermore, PEW researchers found that responses varied by age, race, parental status, and gender (PEW, *New American Father*, 2013). One of the most interesting findings was the variance in response by age. When looking at the same question, a much higher percentage of younger adults reported that all four roles were extremely important for fathers to provide their children. For example, 55% of younger adults reported that emotional support was extremely important for a father to provide to his child, compared to only 39% of older adults (age 65 and older). The difference in responses by age could represent the changing ideals of fatherhood roles and expectations. If these trends continue, it is likely that we may see even greater similarity in expectations of mothering and fathering roles in future generations.

### **Converging Time Spent in Similar Parenting Activities, but Gaps Remain.**

Just because American adults in the previous study agree that fathers and mothers *should* share similar roles, it does not necessarily mean that parents spend their time that way. Another PEW study set out to better understand this distinction (PEW, *Modern Parenthood*, 2013). The chart below depicts the average number of hours spent in various activities such as childcare, housework, and paid work. Comparing the number of hours spent in these activities between 1965 and 2011, we can see that not only have fathering attitudes and expectations changed over time, but actual behaviors have changed as well. In 1965, mothers report spending 75% more time in childcare per week than fathers, compared to a 50% difference

between mothers and fathers in 2011. Other trends reveal that mothers are spending more time in paid work and childcare in 2011 compared to 1965, and significantly less time in housework. Fathers on the other hand, report fewer hours in paid work and more hours involved in housework and childcare.



One important distinction is that even if time spent on various activities between mothers and fathers is becoming more similar, it is not clear from this study what exact activities mothers and fathers are involved in at home. For example, mothers may still primarily be involved in routine childcare activities (e.g., bathing, changing diapers, etc.) while fathers may be primarily involved in play activities with their child. So there may still be distinct gendered differences that are not captured in the graph above.

### **Types of Fathers and Common Issues They Face**

Beyond the ways in which fatherhood roles and identity have changed over time, another major factor that also affects fathering is a man's marital and parental status. There are many different types of fathers such as non-resident fathers, stepfathers, married fathers, absentee fathers, single fathers, stay-at-home fathers, and incarcerated fathers. Although every father is unique, data reveal common trends specific to certain types of fathers. Understanding the general situations and challenges that these fathers face is a key strategy to identify potential ways to encourage father participation in the parenting process. Again, it is important to

understand that these trends will not apply to all fathers in these specific situations, but will provide a helpful overview about diverse fathering types.

**Married Fathers: In general fare better than unmarried fathers.** In general, married fathers fare better than unmarried, cohabiting, and single fathers in areas such as education levels, employment, children’s healthcare coverage, food stamp receipt, and poverty status (see Table 1 and Figure 4) (U.S. Census Bureau, American’s Family and Living Arrangements, 2011). While marital status is linked with better educational and employment outcomes, this relationship is not causal. We cannot say that being married causes fathers to experience these outcomes, in fact, the results may be due to selection of the kind of fathers that chose to marry. However, maintaining access to both parents does seem to have a positive impact on children’s outcomes.

**TABLE 1. Characteristics of Married, Unmarried, and Single-father Households**

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>Married Fathers</i>	<i>Unmarried, Cohabiting Fathers</i>	<i>One-parent household (fathers only)</i>
<i>Education of male</i>			
<i>Less than HS</i>	11.4 %	25.6 %	13.7 %
<i>HS graduate</i>	25.9 %	42 %	40.5 %
<i>Some college</i>	25.1 %	24.9 %	26.5 %
<i>Bachelor’s or higher</i>	37.6 %	7.6 %	19.2 %
<i>Employment of male</i>			
<i>Not employed</i>	11%	23%	23 %
<i>Employed</i>	89%	77%	77 %

Table adapted from America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2012 by Jonathan Vespa, Jamie M. Lewis, and Rose M. Kreider

**Married & Cohabiting Stepfathers: A majority of step fathers are married (83%).** Traditionally, stepfathers were exclusively referred to as a man who became related to their partner’s child through marriage. However, as alternate family formations have become increasingly common, (partners living together without being married) cohabiting fathers now commonly refer to their partner’s child as a stepchild (U.S. Census Bureau, Adopted Children and Stepchildren, 2010). According to Census data collected in 2009, a majority of stepfathers report being married (83%) with 14% being cohabiting stepfathers, and the remaining 3% of stepfathers report living alone with no other partner. Lastly, never married cohabiting fathers were more likely to report being below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, American’s Family and Living Arrangements, 2011).

➤ ***Common issue stepfathers face: Living with non-biological children.***

In 2011, roughly half (51%) of households reported that the child(ren) in the household were the biological offspring of both partners. This leaves 49% of households that may have children that are biologically the mother's only (27%) or the father's only (11%) or some combination of mother and father biological-only children from previous relationships (U.S. Census

Bureau, American's Family and Living Arrangements, 2011).

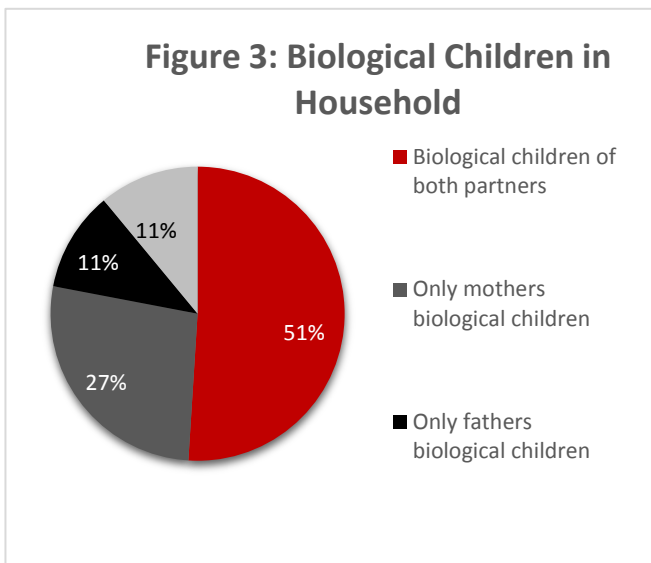


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➤ ***Common issue step fathers face: Parenting non-biological children.*** Those who work with fathers should be aware that blended families— a family with children from a current relationship as well as all previous relationships— are common. Step fathers or cohabiting fathers living in blended families may experience unique stressors and research offers some strategies for men living with non-biological children. One particular study utilized assessed the factors that contribute to the development of healthy stepparent-stepchild relationships (Schrodt, 2006). Stepchildren reported feeling closer to stepparents when stepparents exhibited respect through warm, caring, and open communication. In addition, stepchildren felt closer to stepparents who exhibited clear parental authority. It is common for stepchildren to be unsure what authority a stepparent has in a family, thus open communication between all family members is key to establishing new family norms. However, another study found that adaptability was also important in developing healthy blended family relationships. They note that family members in stepfamilies may need to adopt new roles and should not expect to maintain the same family roles they had in previous families (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001). Lastly, Schrodt found that stepchildren reported higher quality relationships with stepparents when they knew that the romantic relationship between partners was stable and very likely to last. If the relationship appeared to be unstable and fleeting, stepchildren tended to report more distant relationships with a stepparent (Schrodt, 2006).



**Single Fathers: 15% of all single parents are men, but less than half of whom are living without any other adult in the household.**

The Census defines a single father as one who reports having at least one child and lists themselves as the primary householder. According to the 2011 Census report, there are 1.7 million men who reported single father status, comprising 15% of all single parents (U.S. Census Bureau, American's Family and Living Arrangements, 2011). This category includes several types of single fathers, as seen in

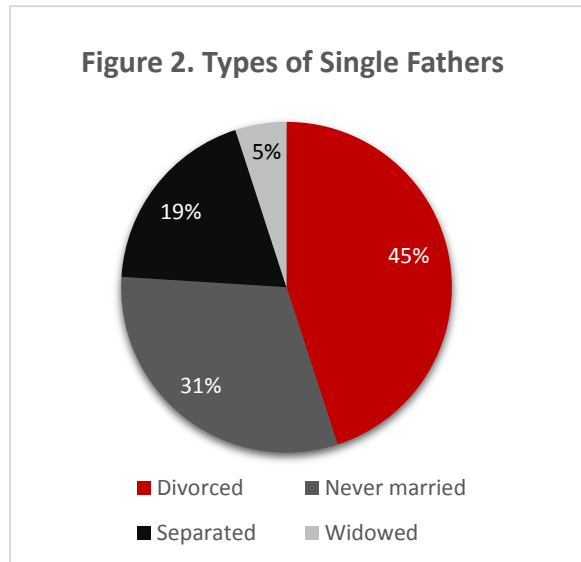


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Figure 2. The most common type of single father is divorced (45%) followed by never married (31%). While it is helpful to

understand the various types of single fathers, it is unclear if these fathers are the only adult in the household or if they are living with a partner. This distinction would significantly change children's access to resources, as having another adult in the household may translate to additional income, childcare, and child supervision.

Luckily, another question in the Census survey provides further clarification. Fathers are asked whether they live in a one-parent family group, maintained by the father, and—the key addition— if they are the only adult in the household. The results of this question reveal that there are actually only 761,000 single fathers in the U.S. who do not live with another adult in the household. Thus, while 15% of all single parents are fathers, only about half of those fathers are actually living without another adult in the household. This distinction is important because a single father living with a partner compared to a single father living alone, will likely yield very different implications for child well-being (U.S. Census Bureau, American's Family and Living Arrangements, 2011).

- **Common issue single fathers face: Limited resources, either financially or socially.** While this is certainly not the case for all single fathers, any single parent may have additional difficulty balancing work and family if they are the simultaneously the sole provider and nurturer for their children. Without dual incomes or having two adults to alternate childcare responsibilities, single

fathers may feel that they have inadequate resources to meet the demands of fathering.

**Nonresident Fathers and Absentee Fathers: Fragile Families Data Provides Some Insight.** Nonresident fathers can be split into two more specific categories: married men who later divorce or separate from their partner, and never married men who move away after the birth of their child. Unfortunately, current Census survey methodologies make it difficult to analyze aspects of nonresident fathers and absentee fathers, however, data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study offers useful information about these types of fathers. The Fragile Families study includes data from nearly 5,000 children born in U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000. The survey was developed specifically to better understand unmarried parents and their children. The study includes interviews with both mothers and fathers at the time of their child's birth, as well as follow-up interviews when their child is ages one, three, five, and nine.

Relying on the data collected from the Fragile Families study, researchers find that at the time of the child's birth, a majority of unmarried parents report being in a romantic relationship with their partner (over 80%) and believed that their chances of marrying their current partner were "pretty good" or "almost certain" (McLanahan, 2004). However, longitudinal data reveals that only five years later, 60% of these couples are no longer romantically involved (Center for Research on Child Wellbeing 2003, 2007). Furthermore, after the relationship dissolves, it is very common for mothers to transition into new relationships and have children with their new partner (Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010). Multi-partnered fertility—adults having biological children with more than one partner—is becoming increasingly common for particular subgroups of these families. Specifically, data from 2002, shows that over one-third of Black men aged 35 to 44 reported having families with multi-partnered fertility (Guzzo & Furstenberg, 2007). Additionally, researchers find that unmarried parents tend to report higher levels of multi-partnered fertility compared to married parents, even when asked years later (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2006).

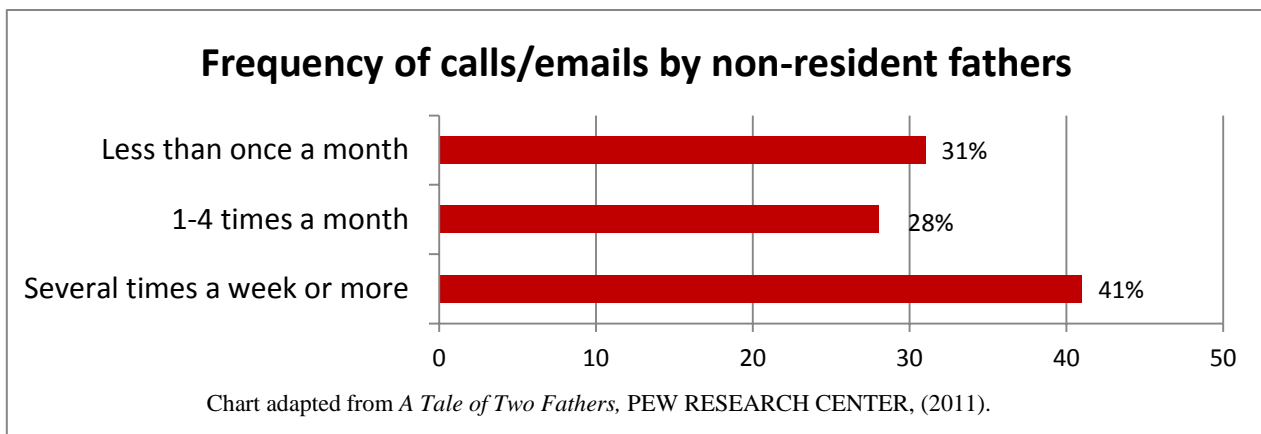
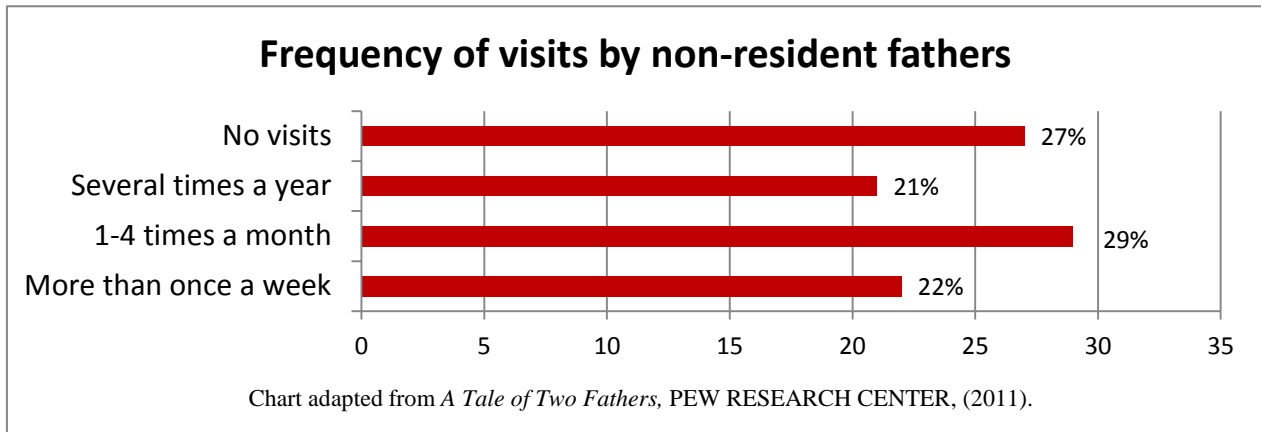
Taken together, these findings illuminate the high levels of relationship instability likely to occur in these families, particularly for partners who are unmarried at the time of the child's birth. These high levels of instability have negative implications for children. In particular, researchers find that paternal involvement declines abruptly directly after the relationship between unmarried parents dissolves, especially if children are very young (Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010). The type of paternal involvement spans many dimensions, such as financial contributions,



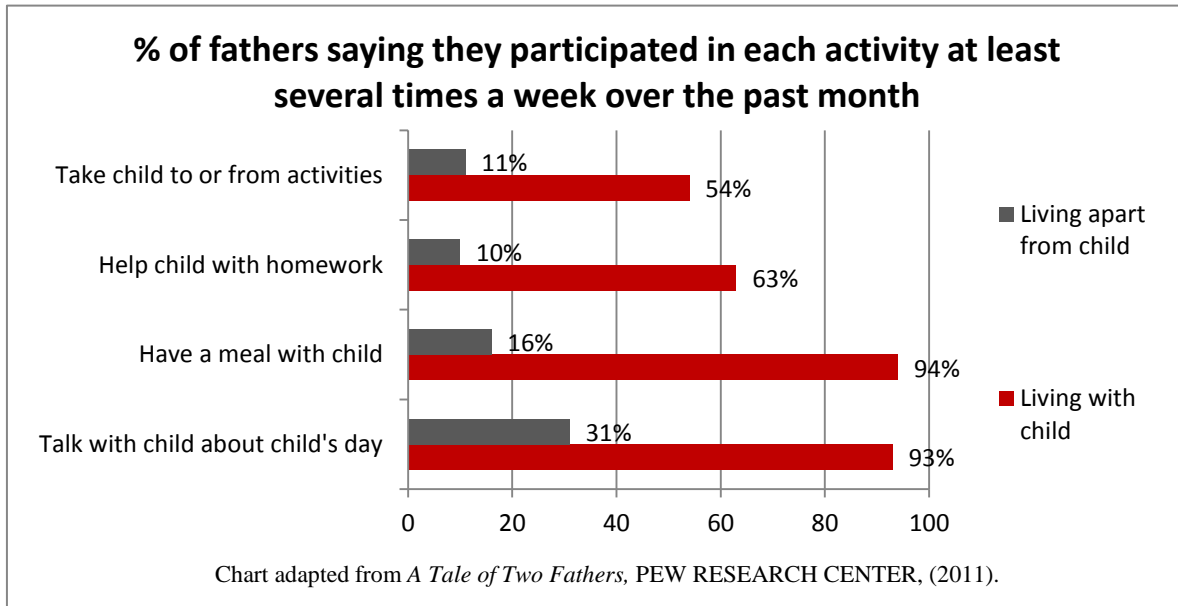
emotional and social connectedness, academic attention, and shared activities. Father involvement may decrease because fathers enter into new relationships and have new demands that occupy their resources. However, mothers may also gate keep biological fathers from involvement, especially if she has re-partnered (Tach, Mincy, & Edin, 2010).

- **Common issues nonresident fathers face: Maintaining contact with children.** In 2011, more than one out of every four children report living away from their father (27%) (PEW, *A Tale of Two Fathers*, 2011). To compensate, many dads try to keep in touch with their child via email or phone calls throughout the week. On the other hand, some nonresident fathers report little to no contact with their child. One survey found that 41% of nonresident fathers reported reaching out to their child several times a week via phone or email, while over one-third of fathers reported reaching out less than once a month (PEW, *A Tale of Two Fathers*, 2011).

When fathers live away from their child it can be more difficult for them to be involved in daily routines with their child, such as sharing meals, working



on homework, and playing together. In fact, one survey conducted by PEW found nonresident fathers participated in significantly fewer activities with their child. Specifically, 93% of dads living with their child report talking with their child about their child’s day, compared to only 31% of nonresident fathers. Fathers and those working with fathers should be aware that everyday, common interactions may be more difficult for nonresident fathers to maintain with their child.



- ***Common issues nonresident fathers face: Assisting in providing basic needs for children.*** A father’s living arrangement and current relationship with their child’s mother will likely affect a child’s economic situation. These relationships are depicted below in Figure 4 (U.S. Census Bureau, *American’s Family and Living Arrangements*, 2011). Children who live with two married parents seem to fare best in regard to healthcare coverage, food stamp receipt, and poverty status. Children who live with unmarried parents have a higher proportion of reliance on food stamps and are more likely to be impoverished. These trends illuminate the economic advantage that many children have when they stay geographically close to their fathers.

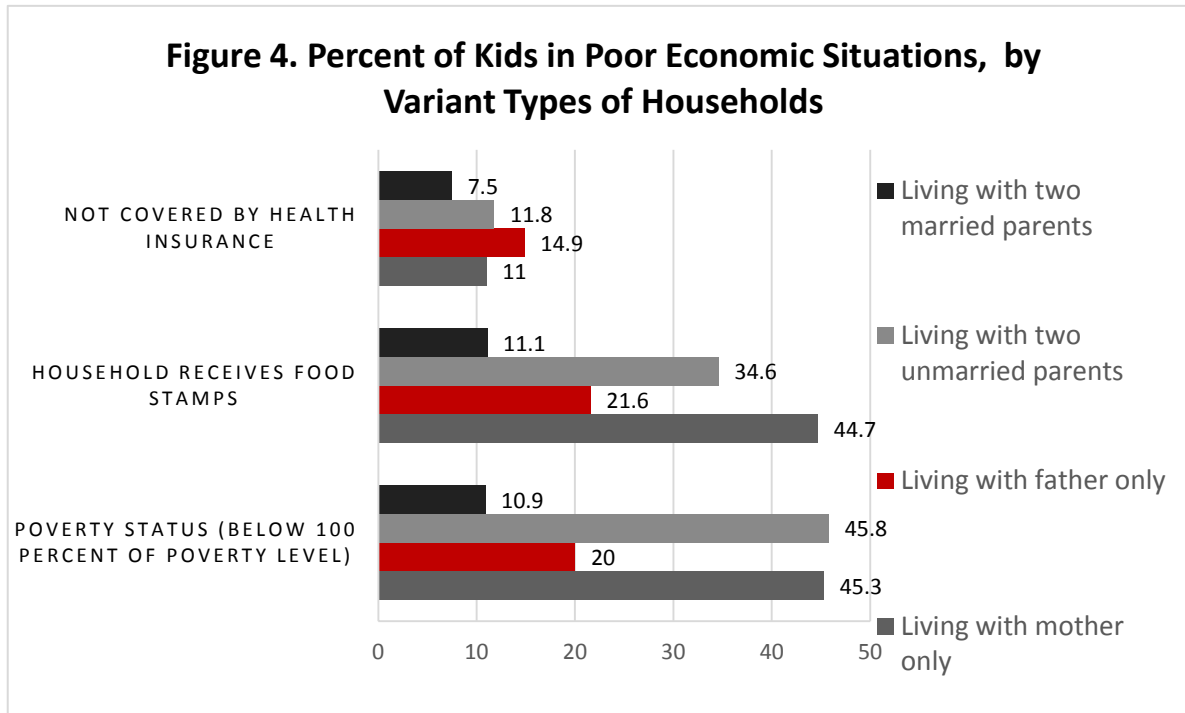


Figure adapted from America's Families and Living Arrangements: 2012 by Jonathan Vespa, Jamie M. Lewis, and Rose M. Kreider

➤ **Common issues nonresident fathers face: Paying child support.** The vast majority of custodial parents are mothers (82%), meaning that a majority of fathers are expected to pay child support. (U.S. Census Bureau, *Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support*, 2009). Furthermore, paying child support can be very difficult for many fathers. One out of three noncustodial parents has a household income below the poverty line. Because fathers constitute a majority of the noncustodial parents, childcare support payments may be a significant source of stress for low-income fathers (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2004).

**Stay-at-home, married fathers: Less than 1% of all married parents.** Stay-at-home parents are defined by the Census as parents who are out of the labor force for the entire year, with the purpose of taking care of home and family, while their partner is in the labor force. The percentage of married fathers who stay at home with children under the age of 15 is very small, but has slightly increased over the past five years from .07% of all stay-at-home parents to .09% (U.S. Census Bureau, *American's Family and Living Arrangements*, 2011). However, this slight increase is likely due to effects from the recent recession, when men experienced disproportionately higher unemployment rates than women. Twenty-four percent of married mothers were considered a stay-at-home parent in 2012, which roughly

equates to 75% of children in married households having two working parents (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2012).

- ***Common issue stay-at-home fathers face: Social stigma.*** Because stay-at-home fathers are less common, these fathers may feel isolated or out of their comfort zone. One recent study interviewed over 200 stay-at-home fathers and found that roughly half of the respondents reported that they had experienced a negative stigma-based incident related to their decision to be a stay-at-home father (Rochlen, McKelly, & Whittaker, 2010). Interestingly, the vast majority of these fathers (70%) reported that stay-at-home mothers were the most common instigators of these stigma-based interactions. The fathers reported that they believed these interactions occurred due to opposing attitudes about gender roles, unfamiliarity with stay-at-home fathers, general discomfort or distrust with men being around children, or religious or cultural differences (Rochlen, McKelly, & Whittaker, 2010). In addition, the researchers found that the men who had experienced a stigma-based incident also reported lower levels of social support compared to those who had not experienced any stigma-based incidents (Rochlen, McKelly, & Whittaker, 2010; Rochlen, McKelly, Suizzo, & Scaringi, 2008). Stay-at-home fathers should be encouraged to seek social support to alleviate potential stress they may encounter due to social stigma. Some cities even offer play groups specifically for stay-at-home dads.

**Incarcerated Fathers.** More than 2.7 million children in the U.S. experience having an incarcerated parent at some point in their life (The Pew Charitable Trusts: Pew Center on the States, 2010). Specifically, in 2010 it was estimated that there were 1.1 million incarcerated men who were fathers to at least one child between the ages of 1 and 17 (The Pew Charitable Trusts: Pew Center on the State). Unfortunately, these trends have been steadily increasing since 1991 and parental incarceration is projected to affect more and more children every year in the future (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010). In 2010, 64% percent of the incarcerated fathers were young (between ages 25 and 34) and 46% of all incarcerated fathers were Black (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010).

- ***Common issue incarcerated fathers face: Maintaining emotional and social ties with children.*** Most incarcerated parents are imprisoned due to less serious offenses, such as drug and nonviolent crimes. As such, they are likely to be imprisoned for a short time with plans to re-enter their child's life. In these cases, maintaining a relationship between father and child can be beneficial to maintain normalcy for the child. In-prison parenting programs and child visitation have been evaluated by researchers who find that these interventions

are correlated with positive outcomes for incarcerated fathers, such as lower rates of recidivism, increased self-esteem, and increased parental involvement after being released (LaVigne, Naser, Brooks, & Castro 2005). However, other studies find that maintaining child contact during parental imprisonment can also be linked to negative child outcomes as well, so it should not be advised for all families (Poehlmann, Dallaire, Loper & Shear, 2010). One possible explanation for the variant results is that some prison facilities are more child friendly, offering a meeting room with books and toys, while other facilities can be frightening and scaring for children to visit. Furthermore, the quality of the visits or interactions play a key role in maintaining the relationship after the incarcerated father is released (LaVigne, Naser, Brooks, & Castro 2005). Whether it is through phone calls, letters, or in-person visits –if appropriate— incarcerated fathers can stay engaged in multiple facets of their child’s life. For example, incarcerated fathers can ask their child about specific classes in school, hobbies, and goals.

**Most Fathers.** While specific types of fathers are likely to share some similar characteristics and issues, there are some circumstances that are common to a majority of fathers. Again, as parent educators and community stakeholders become more aware of the types of issues fathers face, they will be better equipped to tailor their suggestions and resources to more effectively meet the needs of fathers.

- ***Common issues most fathers face: Balancing work and family.*** All parents in the workforce must learn how to balance the demands of work and family simultaneously. Half of fathers report that work and family life is very or somewhat difficult to balance (PEW, Modern Parenting, 2013). Additionally, 46% of fathers report that they feel like they spend too little time with their children compared to 23% of mothers who report the same finding (PEW, Modern Parenting, 2013). Mothers who are stay-at-home parents could be driving the disparity in this particular survey. However, it is significant that nearly half of fathers report that they feel they are not spending enough time with their children.
- ***Common issues most fathers face: Confidence in fathering.*** Every father is unique with different skills, stressors, and experience. Some men feel confident in their role as a father while others may feel inexperienced, frustrated, and overwhelmed by their role as a father. In a study conducted by PEW, 64% of fathers reported feeling that they were doing an “excellent” or “very good” job as parents (PEW, Modern Parenting, 2013). Mothers report somewhat higher

rates than fathers do (73%) and fathers who live apart from their children report the lowest levels of confidence in fathering (PEW, Modern Parenting, 2013).

As fatherhood roles and involvement continue to change, it may take time for some fathers to feel confident in new roles of fathering that they may not be used to, such as routine childcare and nurturing. One way to encourage confidence in fathering is to allow fathers more experience in various parenting tasks (Barry, Smith, Deutsch, & Perry-Jenkins, 2011). Parents should work together and support one another's parenting efforts, providing encouragement and fostering active participation from both partners, if possible. It is common for parents to adopt specified roles, especially when children are very young because there are some tasks (such as breastfeeding) that only moms can perform. However, if parents further specialize their parenting efforts, maternal gatekeeping may occur (Zvara, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Dush, 2013).

*Maternal gatekeeping* refers to the belief that a mother should be the only one to perform certain childcare tasks or behaviors. If this occurs, mothers may exclude fathers from engaging in parenting efforts and criticize a father's parenting efforts. In this situation, the father may not be as involved and may have fewer opportunities to gain confidence in his parenting abilities (Zvara, Sullivan, & Dush, 2013). These findings were confirmed through results of a recent PEW study that found that fathers who felt like they spend adequate time with their children are three times more likely to report that they feel like they are doing an excellent job as a father, compared to fathers who reported spending not enough time with their kids (PEW, Modern Parenting, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Every father is unique. Each father has access to different resources, skills, stressors, experience, and a distinct relationship with their child(ren). However there are many situations that most fathers face, such as balancing work and family life, learning to develop a quality relationship with one's child, and building confidence in fathering.

Parent educators and all those who work with fathers need to be aware of the complex aspects that may influence their ability to be a responsible, confident, and engaged father. By being more conscious of fathers' needs, parent educators and other community stakeholders should support programs, resources, and policies that reach fathers and address the unique needs that fathers have.



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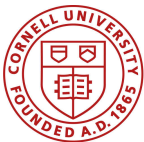
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