

Professional Pages

U.S. Fathers and Common Issues They Face

By Eliza Lathrop Cook

With an estimated 70.1 million fathers in the United States today, many men experience the complexities, joys, and stressors of fatherhood. Fathers have access to different resources, stressors, experience levels, and distinct relationships with their child(ren). In addition, fathering roles and fatherhood identities have changed over the past decades, influencing how men think of fathering and the types of roles fathers adopt. The goal of this Professional Page is to provide professionals additional awareness of common issues that modern fathers face.

Types of Fathers and Common Issues They Face

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. By understanding the general situations and challenges that these fathers face, those who work with fathers will be better equipped to interact with and tailor programs, policies, and resources for fathers.

Single Fathers: 15% of all single parents are men, but only 6% of single fathers live without any other adult in the household. According to the 2011 Census report, there are 1.7 million men who reported single father status, comprising 15% of all single parents. However, only about 6% of all single parents are single dads living without another adult in the household.

➤ ***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 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.

Married & Cohabiting Stepfathers: A majority of stepfathers are married (83%). Traditionally, stepfathers were exclusively referred to as a man who became related to their partner's child through marriage. However, as cohabiting

has become increasingly common, cohabiting fathers now frequently refer to their partner's child as a stepchild as well. 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.

- ***Common issue stepfathers face: Parenting 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. 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. Stepchildren from one particular study reported feeling closer to stepparents who exhibited clear parental authority and adaptability in developing new parental roles. Lastly, researchers find that stepchildren reported higher quality relationships with stepparents when they knew that the romantic relationship between partners was stable and very likely to last.

Nonresident Fathers and Absentee Fathers: Fragile Families Data Provides Some Insight. 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 and over 80% believed that their chances of marrying their current partner were "pretty good" or "almost certain". However, only five years later, 60% of these couples are no longer romantically involved. After the relationship dissolves, it is very common for mothers to transition into new relationships and have children with their new partner. In addition, researchers find that paternal involvement abruptly declines directly after the relationship ends between unmarried parents. To summarize, families in this particular situation may experience a lot of instability which will likely affect child outcomes.

- ***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%). To compensate, many dads try to keep in touch with their child via email or phone calls. However, some nonresident fathers report little to no contact with their child. One survey found that 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.
- ***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. Children who live

with two married parents seem to fare best in regard to healthcare coverage, food stamp receipt, and poverty status. This trend illuminates the economic advantage that many children have when they stay geographically close to their fathers.

- ***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. However, these payments may be a significant source of stress for low-income fathers. Paying child support can be very difficult for many fathers seeing as one out of three noncustodial parents has a household income below the poverty line.

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. 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, as discussed previously, maintaining access to both parents does seem to have a positive impact on children's outcomes.

Stay-at-home, married fathers: Less than 1% of all married parents. 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%. However, this slight increase is likely due to effects from the recent recession, when men experienced disproportionately higher unemployment rates than women.

- ***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. Interestingly, the vast majority of these fathers (70%) reported that stay-at-home mothers were the most common instigators of these stigma-based interactions. In addition, the researchers found that the men who had experienced a stigma-based incident also reported lower levels of social support.

Incarcerated Fathers. 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. Unfortunately, these trends have been steadily increasing since 1991 and parental incarceration is projected to affect more children in the future.

- ***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 and have plans to re-enter their child's life soon. In these cases, maintaining a relationship between father and child can be beneficial to maintain normalcy for the child. However, in-prison parenting programs and child visitation have been evaluated by researchers who find that these interventions have mixed results. Certain studies find that these programs are correlated with positive outcomes for incarcerated fathers such as lower rates of recidivism, increased self-esteem, and increased parental involvement after being released, while other studies find that maintaining child contact can also be linked to negative outcomes for children. Maintaining contact is not advised for all families, but if parents decide it is appropriate, incarcerated fathers may arrange in-person visits with their child or stay connected through phone calls or letters.

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.

- ***Common issues most fathers face: Balancing work and family.*** In 2012, roughly 75% of children lived in married households having two working parents. Half of fathers, in a particular study, report that work and family life is very or somewhat difficult to balance. Additionally, 46% of fathers report that they feel like they spend too little time with their children.
- ***Common issues most fathers face: Confidence in fathering.*** 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 recent study, 64% of fathers reported feeling that they were doing an "excellent" or "very good" job as parents. 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.

Conclusion.

Every father is unique. Each father has access to different resources, skills, stressors, experience, and a distinct relationship with their child(ren). 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.

Visit the *Parenting in Context* project at:

<http://www.human.cornell.edu/pam/outreach/parenting/>

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