

# Noncustodial Fathers' Involvement With Their Children: A Right or a Privilege?

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores the key determinants of noncustodial fathers' involvement with their children. The stereotype that fathers have little interest in parenting their children is contradicted. The findings reveal that fathers are committed to parenting; however, actions on the part of the mothers and what the participants perceive to be bias on the part of the courts prevent fathers from having the relationship with their children they desire. Even fathers who have been committed early in the relationship to their children, pay child support, and give no justification for being denied parental rights do not necessarily get to spend time with their children. Parenting plans should be negotiated at the same time as child support orders and revisited periodically.

In 2002, 23% of children lived only with their mothers and 5% lived only with their fathers, making children more than 4 times as likely to live with their mothers than to live with their fathers (Fields, 2003). Increasingly, families include parents who have never been married to each other. As of April 2000, about one-third of custodial mothers had not been married to the noncustodial father, while 17.2% of custodial fathers had not been married to the mother (Grail, 2002). Thus fathers must make decisions about the level of participation they want to have with their children and then must negotiate with the mothers in order for that involvement to occur.

There is a growing awareness that fathers matter, and there has been an explosion of programs in the last decade that work with fathers. The National Center on Fathers and Families identifies key assumptions about fathers including:

- Fathers care, even if that caring is not shown in conventional ways.
- Father's presence matters—in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development.
- Existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment create obstacles and disincentives to father involvement.
- Intergenerational beliefs and practices within families of origin significantly influence the behaviors of young parents. (Sylvester & Reich, 2002, p. 19)

In spite of these assumptions, the prevailing cultural stereotype of noncustodial fathers continues to be the “deadbeat dad” who has reneged on his responsibilities. The pervasiveness of this stereotype is reflected in a 1997 Congressional bill titled the Deadbeat Parents Punishment

Act (Deadbeat Parents Punishment Act, 1997). To mitigate the problem of fathers not supporting their children economically, over the past 30 years, policy makers have strengthened child support policies to ensure noncustodial parents provide for their children. However, recent research demonstrates that fathers are likely to be involved in other ways with their children, particularly at the birth, even when the couple is unmarried, and especially if the couple is still involved romantically (Johnson, 2001). Yet, over time, noncustodial fathers become less involved (Seltzer, 1991). The purpose of this study is to more clearly understand the key determinants of noncustodial fathers' involvement with their children. The following questions are discussed: (a) How do the relationships participants had with their own fathers impact their relationships with their children? (b) Do fathers' involvements early in their children's lives make a difference in their involvement later in the children's lives? (c) How do the relationships with the mothers affect fathers' involvement with their children? (d) Does payment of child support ensure fathers will see their children?

Within the framework of exchange theory, fathers' stories contextualize their struggles and their viewpoints. Their stories illustrate the importance of fathers' family of origin in shaping their attitudes about fatherhood, fathers' commitment to parenting, and barriers that derail fathers' goals to be involved in their children's lives, including the relationship with the mothers and the child support system. These barriers lead them to ask if fathering is a right or a privilege and to call for policy changes.

## Literature Review

### *Family of Origin*

Some studies have evaluated men's relationships with their fathers and how it impacts their feelings about fatherhood (Parke, 1996; Allen & Doherty, 1996). Parke found "intergenerational transmission of parenting is an active process" (p. 82). Parke also noted that fathers want to model good relationships and to compensate for deficiencies in poor relationships. Allen and Doherty, in their study of 10 teenage African American fathers, found that those men whose fathers were absent when they were growing up want to be involved with their own children. Sylvester & Reich (2002) noted that men whose fathers cared for and sacrificed for them are more likely to become responsible fathers themselves. Johnson (2001) found that fathers who grew up with both parents are more likely to be involved with their own children. Thus, family-of-origin experiences do influence perceptions of fatherhood.

### *Fathers' Commitment to Parenting*

Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson (1998) suggested that fathering is a multilateral relationship, with many

influences that might impact the degree to which fathers are involved in the lives of their children. These influences include quality of the coparental relationship and institutional practices. Parke (1996), too, suggested a systems view, arguing that many factors need to be considered, including support from the mother and informal as well as formal networks.

One issue regarding noncustodial fathers is the level of commitment they have to their children, beyond financial obligations. Some researchers have found that fathers make both financial as well as in-kind contributions whenever possible (Furstenberg, Sherwood, & Sullivan, 1992; Edin, 1995; Edin & Lein, 1997; McLanahan & Carlson, 2002). Other research has shown fathers are likely to be less committed to a child born outside of marriage (Furstenberg & Harris, as cited in Doherty et al., 1998; Garfinkel, McLanahan, & Hanson, 1998). Minton and Pasley (1996) found that whether or not fathers reside with their children, they are equally invested in being fathers and that marital status does not generally affect father involvement in child-related activities. They also note that more complicated father-child relationships occur after a divorce when fathers must figure out how best to interact with their children. Having to leave children after spending time with them produces negative effects because fathers feel they are abandoning their children and not following through with their commitment (Arendell, 1995; Kruk, 1991; Kruk, 1994).

### *Barriers to Involvement in Their Children's Lives*

**Safety.** One issue affecting fathers' involvement is concern for the safety of children. Both custodial and noncustodial parents express concern for the well-being of their child while in the other's care, with custodial parents expressing the most concerns (Pearson & Thoennes, 1998). Some mothers may not want to allow fathers to see their children because they consider it too risky (Turetsky & Notar, 1999). Yet other mothers may feel the benefits of father involvement outweigh the risks (Laakso, 2002). Safety-related concerns of the mothers can lead to reduced opportunities for fathers to be with their children.

**Relationship with the mother.** The images of noncustodial fathers generally depict how society places most of the blame on them for failure to be involved with their children. Yet, the mothers' attitudes toward the father-child bond are also critical (DeLuccie, 1995; Doherty et al., 1998). The National Council for Children's Rights (as cited in Pearson & Thoennes, 2000) estimated that the custodial parent interferes with visitation in 37% of divorce cases. Although studies suggest that mothers want their children to be involved with the fathers, (Kurz, 1995; Laakso, 2002; McLanahan & Carlson, 2002;) research has shown that, over time, noncustodial fathers see less of their children (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Argys, Peters, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998). Amato and Rezac (1994)

found that the noncustodial parent has higher levels of involvement when there is less interparental conflict. Allen and Doherty (1996) noted that the most striking obstacle to being the kinds of fathers they want to be are the strained relationships with the mothers of their children. The relationship between parents is crucial to having fathers involved with their children.

**The child support system.** Payment of child support can be a key factor in the frequency of contacts between children and noncustodial parents. Studies suggest an interconnection between payment of child support and contact between fathers and their children, but it is not clear which action is primary (Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983; Seltzer, Schaeffer, & Charng, 1989; Teachman, 1991). Pearson and Thoennes (1998), in their study of programs to increase noncustodial fathers' contact with their children, found that access to children and payment of child support are correlated. Noncustodial fathers were best helped with access problems if they were current in child support payments. However, Pearson and Thoennes concluded that access disputes were more the result of relationship issues between parents than financial matters.

About 59% of custodial parents had child-support agreements in 2000, which includes legal as well as non-legal, informal agreements (Grail, 2002). In Grail's study, 84.8% of the custodial parents due child support payments in 1999 had arrangements for joint custody or visitation privileges with the noncustodial parents. Over three-fourths received some support payments. About half (46.1%) of the custodial parents who were due child support but did not have joint custody or visitation arrangements received any payments. For the 6.7 million custodial parents not due child support, 67.3% had arrangements with the noncustodial parents for visitation privileges or some type of shared custody (Grail, 2002). These numbers indicate that fathers who pay child support are involved with their children. However, as this study will demonstrate, paying child support and/or having a parenting plan is no guarantee that fathers will spend more time with their children. One reason given is the bias of the courts towards mothers and against fathers. Arendall (1995) found, in his study of 75 fathers, that men believe there is a legal bias toward mothers, resulting in an injustice for fathers and making them disenfranchised parents.

## Theoretical Framework

Exchange theory is the framework used here to evaluate the fathers' decisions about spending time with their children because it can be used at both the microlevel, looking at relationship factors with the family, and at the macrolevel, evaluating the relationship between the fathers and the larger institutional systems. Exchange theory

involves making choices to reduce costs and to maximize rewards (Homans, 1961; Nye, 1979). Nye presents the basic assumptions of exchange theory, including:

- 1) within the limitations of the information they possess and their ability to predict the future, humans make the choices that will bring the most profit; (2) social life requires reciprocity; and, (3) people must undergo costs in order to obtain rewards. (1979, p. 7)

According to this theory, fathers will make those choices they believe will bring the best financial rewards, as well as psychological rewards, to themselves and to their children. If they believe that payment of child support will result in a parenting plan that is satisfactory, they will be more likely to comply with child support orders. Exchange theory is also applicable to the relationship between the parents as each parent weighs the costs of a continued relationship with the other.

## Method

### Participants

The 25 fathers interviewed for this study were clients of Devoted Dads, a federally designated responsible fatherhood program administered by a social services agency in western Washington State. Devoted Dads provided comprehensive services for noncustodial parents including legal advocacy, employment assistance, and parenting classes, with the mission of encouraging parents to be responsibly involved in the lives of their children. Men became clients of Devoted Dads voluntarily through referrals from other agencies or from other clients. Inclusion criteria for fathers in this study were: 18 years of age or older, English-speaking, and having at least one child in a nonmarital relationship. Only fathers who had a child in a nonmarital relationship were selected because they must handle additional issues of paternity establishment and staying or leaving a relationship that may or may not have been one of commitment at the time of the pregnancy. Agency staff identified clients who fit the criteria and referred them to the researchers.

### Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured, audio-taped, face-to-face interviews that lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. Participants received gift certificates of \$20. Questions were asked about the relationship with the mother, including how they met, what the relationship was like at the time the mother became pregnant, and changes in the relationship over time. Fathers were also asked how satisfied they were with the parenting plan, if the mothers had ever refused visits, and what they saw as the connection between paying child support and seeing their child. They were also asked to describe

the family they grew up with and how their family of origin had influenced their attitudes about spending time with their child.

The transcribed interviews were analyzed with descriptive statistics to develop a codebook to organize data. Codes were keyed to research questions and defined precisely enough to be clear about whether a segment of data fit into a category. Then, through repeated iterations of the data, common themes and patterns were identified. Finally, the themes and patterns were compared to those in the literature (Miles & Huberman, 1994). After preliminary analysis, results were shared with a focus group of 10 men from Devoted Dads, 4 who had participated in the interviews and 6 who were in similar situations. They provided feedback confirming the validity of the findings.

## Results

Findings will be described through descriptive statistics, narrative excerpts, and stories of the fathers. The names of the participants, their children, and their partners have been changed to preserve confidentiality. When describing the relationship between noncustodial fathers and children, the term *visitation* is often used. However, a number of the men in this study strongly objected to this term, as they felt—as biological fathers—they should not be described as “visiting” their children. As expressed by one participant,

The term is kind of derogatory. It's like saying, well you should visit Idaho or Montana. Parents, fathers are [an] integral part of their children's life. Although different, they give just as weighty inputs and help shape a child just as much as a mother. And to say it's a visit is to demean the position of being a father.

Thus, unless used in a quote by the father, the term *parenting plan* will be used instead. Four themes are prominent in explaining fathers' level of involvement with their children: (a) The family of origin influences fathers, (b) the fathers were committed to being part of their child's life, (c) behaviors of both mothers and fathers lead to relationship issues that interfere with father-child relationships, and (d) courts are biased towards mothers. Stories of participants and what influenced their fathering opportunities will demonstrate these themes.

### Descriptive Statistics

Ages of the 25 participants ranged from 25 to 55 years, with slightly more than half (56%) falling below 40 and the remainder 40 and above. Ethnicity was diverse, with 11 (44%) White, 8 (32%) African American, 4 (16%) biracial, 1 (4%) Native American, and 1 (4%) Latino. Incomes ranged from less than \$5,000, including 3 participants who were homeless, to 3 men with incomes of more than \$35,000.

Ages of the children ranged from 8 months to 20 years. Although 3 of the men had older children from previous relationships, these relationships were not included in the interviews as child support issues were no longer relevant. Six fathers had children by more than one partner. Thus, there were 36 mothers involved when evaluating relationship and parenting issues.

### Narrative Excerpts

**Family of origin.** The participants were asked about their family of origin and in what way their relationship with their own father might have influenced their feelings and behaviors about fatherhood. Fourteen participants were raised in two-parent families, including 3 men who were living with a stepparent by the time they were 2 years old. Eleven fathers were raised in one-parent families.

Relationships described as good were experienced by 8 men who were raised in two-parent families and 2 who were from single-parent families. These men used terms such as “Leave it to Beaver” types of households or “all-American” families. What made the relationships positive in the eyes of the participants was the stability of the family, the caring, loving nature of their relationships, and how much their parents were involved in their lives, particularly their fathers. The fathers attended sporting events with them and “were there for them” as they were growing up. Three of the 10 men felt they did not get to spend as much time with their fathers as they would have liked, but described a good relationship because the fathers worked hard to support their families and the men respected them for that effort.

Of the 15 poor relationships, 6 were experienced by fathers from two-parent families and 9 by fathers from one-parent families. The relationships were described as poor because of abuse, alcoholism, or because they seldom saw their fathers. Three of these men did not know their fathers.

Although these participants wanted to emulate good relationships or compensate for poor relationships, the quality of the relationship participants had with their fathers does not mean they have more parenting opportunities with their own children. Of the 10 fathers who reported a good relationship with their father, 6 (60%) were not seeing their child regularly. Nine of the 15 participants with a poor relationship were not seeing their child; the same percentage, 60%, as fathers who reported a good relationship with their own father.

One 47-year-old father of an 11-year-old son had a poor relationship with his father and wanted to have a better relationship with his son. His parents divorced when he was 7 years old. His mother was alcoholic, abusive towards the father, and tried to make her children hate him. He said, “my dad was gone and then I was in his life, but not allowed to be in much of his life. It's really given me determination not to repeat the abandonment issue,

**TABLE 1.** *Father Involvement and Parenting Opportunities (N = 36 cases)*

MEASURES OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT	CASES INCLUDED		PARENTING OPPORTUNITIES			
			SEES CHILD AT LEAST MONTHLY		SEES CHILD LESS THAN MONTHLY	
			No.	%	No.	%
Paternity established	29	81	15	52	14	48
Name on birth certificate <sup>a</sup>	29	81	14	48	15	52
Pays child support <sup>b</sup>	28	78	13	46	15	54
Married or cohabited with mother	30	83	15	50	15	50
Stayed in relationship at least 1 year after birth	28	78	15	54	13	46
Stayed in relationship at least 5 years after birth	18	50	10	56	8	44
Happy/accepting of pregnancy	21	58	12	57	9	43
Parenting plan established <sup>c</sup>	12	33	6	50	6	50

Note. The number of mothers involved is 36. Percentages for columns on the frequency of involvement opportunities are based on the number of cases included.

<sup>a</sup> Two fathers do not know if their name is on birth certificate. <sup>b</sup> Fathers assume some of the child support paid goes to the mother. <sup>c</sup> This information is missing for 2 relationships and in 2 other relationships, the father did not know. Two fathers had joint custody.

the absentee issue.” In spite of his resolve, because he and the mother of his child have separated, he has not been able to see his son as much as he would like.

One participant, a 41-year-old from a two-parent family, wanted to emulate the great relationship he had with his father. “He [his father] was always putting time aside for me ... he made enough time to share with me. That’s what I want to do for my son.” He pays child support, but does not see his child regularly. He believes being separated from his son has had a detrimental effect on both of them. He is fighting for a parenting plan.

A 25-year-old participant with two children had a good relationship with his father even though his parents divorced when he was 9 years old. When asked about the kind of relationship he wanted with his own children, ages 3 and 4, he said, “I see the way my dad provided for us as a man and that’s what I was raised to do.... Children have to know their parents.” He said he sees his children regularly and pays child support, but would like joint custody. Whether from two-parent or one-parent families, and regardless of the quality of relationship with their fathers, these participants want to be good role models for their children and to be actively involved in their lives. Yet the relationship with their own fathers has not made a difference in their parenting opportunities.

**Fathers’ commitments to parenting.** Participants in this study, most of whom did not marry the mothers, but did cohabit for some time after the birth of their children, felt the loss of a relationship with their children. In spite of meeting the expectations of fatherhood when their children were born, being highly involved in caretaking, these fathers still have difficulty seeing their children. Table 1 describes involvement of the participants in the lives of their children, using measures similar to those used by Teitler (2001).

Most of these participants accepted the pregnancy and acknowledged their commitment as a father through paternity establishment and staying in the relationship with the mother as well as the child. In 6 of the 36 rela-

tionships, the parents eventually married. In spite of this involvement with their children when they were born and 78% currently paying child support, only 12 of the 36 had a parenting plan established; 6 of those still did not see their child regularly. In the 18 relationships where there was no parenting plan, 10 of those fathers did not see their children regularly. As a result of having been closely involved in their children’s lives at the beginning, the participants in this study voiced feelings of strong emotional attachment and then abandonment. A 41-year-old father was able to see his daughter every other weekend, but wanted more time with her. “It’s about spending quality time together.... She’s the light of my life.... I only get 31 hours every other week ... that’s not good enough.” A 28-year-old father saw his son 3 times a week, but still felt that was not enough. “It’s actually emotionally harder on the parent that doesn’t have the child than does [have the child].... My heart dies everyday that I’m not with him.” Or as a 37-year-old father of three said, “You can’t have a positive influence on your children if they’re not around.”

Some of these fathers have had personal difficulties in the past, have not always paid child support, or have not always provided the parenting that they should have. But now, they said, they had changed and wanted the opportunity to prove they could be good fathers. One 34-year-old father, who has three children by two mothers, had not seen his two oldest children for 11 years. He was in arrears for not paying child support, but his only income was social security disability. The mother did not even allow his daughters to talk with him on the telephone. As he said,

They need a father figure in their life ... they need guidance.... My children—I can’t see them. I can’t hug them. I can’t take them nowhere. I want to be able to protect them. I’d die for them.... That’s how much I love them. Just unfortunate I haven’t had the life opportunities to be able to do anything.

**TABLE 2.** *Causes for End of Relationship*

CAUSE	FREQUENCY	%
Mother left for another partner	8	17
Mother's substance abuse	5	11
Father's substance abuse	5	11
Mother's domestic violence	2	4
Father's domestic violence	4	9
Both, domestic violence	3	7
Personality differences	10	22
Immaturity	3	7
One-night affair, no further contact	3	7
Unsure	3	7

*Note.* Some fathers gave more than one reason for end of a relationship. The sum of percentages is more than 100% because of rounding.

This father had lived with the mother of these two daughters for 5 years and said that, at the beginning, he did everything a father was supposed to do to take care of them. He admitted making mistakes, but would like to make up for them now.

Fathers' expectations of an ongoing relationship with their children, in exchange for their demonstration of commitment early in their children's lives, have not resulted in spending time with their children as the children have become older. One of the barriers derailing the fathers' efforts was the actions of the mothers.

**Relationship with the mother.** As made known by other research (Arditti & Keith, 1993; Furstenberg et al., 1992), the quality of the relationship between parents is part of the complexity that can impact fathers' intentions to be involved in their children's lives. As shown in Table 1, most of these couples (78%) had stayed together at least 1 year. In 18 (50%) of the 36 relationships, the parents stayed involved with each other for at least 5 years, but only 10 of the 18 fathers are seeing their children regularly, and in some cases, only because they have successfully fought for parenting rights. Thus, even a longer-term relationship with the mother has had little impact on current parenting.

Also significant to fathers' parenting opportunities is the current relationship with the mother. In the 19 relationships where the couple had a poor relationship at the time of the study, 14 (74%) were not seeing their child on a regular basis. Participants were asked what they thought had caused the relationship to end.

As seen in Table 2, behaviors of mothers, as well as fathers, created relationship issues. Although domestic violence is often a concern for the safety of children because of fathers' behavior, these fathers reported domestic violence from mothers as well. Other behaviors, including infidelity on the mother's part and substance abuse, caused the fathers to question why the mothers were given custody of the child and why the fathers were experiencing resistance to seeing their children.

In 3 of the 6 relationships where the parents eventually married, there were problems before the birth of their

child, including questions of paternity. In 5 of the 6 cases, the men indicated that their primary reason for getting married was to "do the right thing" rather than for any strong feelings of romantic love.

### ***The Fathers' Stories: Is Parenting a Right or a Privilege?***

Three in-depth stories of the fathers' experiences include one father who married the mother, one who cohabited, and one who never lived with the mother. These stories illustrate how actions of the mothers can prevent fathers from staying involved with their children even when they have a strong desire to do so. They demonstrate the identified themes of family-of-origin experiences, fathers' strong feelings of bonding and commitment to their children, at least in some measure resulting from the early involvement noted in Table 1, and behaviors of the mothers, as noted in Table 2, that led fathers to question decisions of custody. These experiences led these participants to believe that the legal system is biased against fathers. They believe that the child-support system is more interested in the financial remuneration than in the parenting component. The fact that many fathers are paying child support and yet not seeing their children gives credibility to this belief.

**Mike.** Mike is a 55-year-old father of a 13-year-old daughter, Lisa. Mike came from a two-parent family with parents that he describes as great role models. Mike, a veteran of the Vietnam War, was a biker for a while and now works as a shipyard laborer. He was 42 and the mother, Sherrie, was 30 when they had their daughter. They had known each other less than a year and lived together during the pregnancy. She had two children from a previous relationship. Mike was happy about the pregnancy, although worried about Sherrie's drug use. Both had been using drugs at the beginning of their relationship, but he had stopped and she had not. When the baby was born, because of Sherrie's drug use, the state's child protective services got involved. The dispute with the state to keep their child brought them closer together. Although Sherrie kept promising to quit using drugs, she was never successful. After the birth, paternity was established, and Mike's name was on the birth certificate. When Lisa was 1 year old, the couple married. Mike thought the marriage would last forever. He worked and supported the family for 5 years until he came home one day to find that Sherrie had moved to another state with a different man. She left behind their daughter, who was 6, as well as her two other children. The breakup of their marriage led Mike back to drugs and alcohol. When the mother returned 6 months later, the two stepchildren decided to stay with Mike, but Sherrie took their daughter. For a year, Mike was able to see Lisa regularly. Then, without warning, Sherrie and her boyfriend moved to another state with Lisa. He did not see his daughter for almost 3

years. Motivated by his desire to be with Lisa, Mike decided to “clean up his act.” He went to the Veterans Administration programs for anger management and posttraumatic stress disorder. He stopped drinking and got help from Devoted Dads to argue his case before court. Getting a parenting plan has been a long process because Sherrie did not show up for court dates, even though she had returned again, and she and Mike lived in the same town. He would beg her to let him see his daughter and was ignored for 3 years. The day of our interview, Mike had just come from a successful court appearance where he received a parenting plan that allows him to see his daughter every weekend and half the summer. He was elated. Although ecstatic about the parenting plan, Mike still has concerns. He does not feel that either the mother or daughter accepts that he has changed. But most of his anger is toward the system. “I understand they have to protect the child and I’m appreciative of that. Children need protecting. But their protecting the child at the expense of the father is not right.”

He believes that the system is biased against fathers.

The state, they seem to think that a child has to be with the mother. And that’s not always true. And they think that the mother is always right. You have to prove to them the mother is wrong. The mother doesn’t have to prove the father is wrong. And that’s just not fair.

**Greg.** Greg is a 27-year-old father of an 8-year-old daughter, Melissa, that he has seen only once in the past 2 years. Greg’s parents divorced when he was 3 years old. His father was in the military and would drop into their lives unexpectedly and then leave again. Fortunately, Greg had male role models from his extended family that were positive. He and Mary, the mother of his daughter dated for about 7 months before she got pregnant. They were both excited and happy about the pregnancy and began living together. Greg moved Mary and Melissa to his home state to live, but he soon discovered a problem. He and other relatives found that Mary did not tell the truth about any aspect of her life. Greg decided marriage might not be a good idea. They eventually moved back to Washington, but ended the relationship when Melissa was 3. He saw Melissa regularly until medical crises with his mother and grandmother led to his move back home to assist them. When he returned, after 2 years, Mary was cooperative at first in letting him see Melissa. But after a year, she wanted to marry. He refused and since that time, for 2 years, Mary has not let him see his daughter. Mary has since married someone else. She continues to be uncooperative, refusing to complete court papers for a parenting plan. Greg hopes to eventually get joint custody. He, too, blames the system and wonders why the parenting plan was not arranged at the same time as the

child support award. Greg believes that he should have access to his child in exchange for paying child support. Greg filed for a child-support order when his daughter was 6 months old, while he and Mary were still together, so he could avoid having back payments accumulate. He established paternity and his name is on the birth certificate. “I did everything they wanted me to do.” Yet he feels he is put in the same category as fathers who do not meet their obligations.

**Jeff.** Jeff is a 31-year-old father with an 11-year-old son. He came from a two-parent family that he describes as having “caring, loving parents.” Jeff and Becky met in high school and dated for 2 years before she became pregnant. He felt they were too young to become parents, and that it would be best for her to terminate the pregnancy. Becky became upset with his attitude, and she moved in with another man during the pregnancy, telling others that the father of her child had abandoned her. Paternity was established; Jeff’s name is on the birth certificate (only because he got the listed father’s name changed to his own), and he pays child support plus provides medical benefits. Jeff has since married but has no other children. He says his wife is very supportive of his desire to spend more time with his son, Jack. Although Jeff saw his son every other weekend after getting a parenting plan, since Becky moved to another state, he has not been able to see him. When he wrote a modified parenting plan to reflect the move, Becky refused to sign it and has refused to allow him to see Jack at all. Jeff said, “She thinks it’s a privilege rather than a right to [have] visitation.” Jeff does not even have permission to talk to Jack’s teachers or to see his medical records. Jeff, too, believes that the legal system is biased toward mothers:

My attitude is that the courts see the mother as the one that always needs the help and the one that mostly in any disagreement is going to win over the father.... And it seems like it’s pretty weighted to one side, a bias towards the mothers.

Not being able to see their children has brought heartache to these fathers.

## Discussion

In many instances, these fathers feel that they know what kind of fathers they want to be, based on their family-of-origin experiences, and, in fact, some feel that they can do a better job of raising their children than the mothers. For those who do not eventually marry, paternity determinations and child-support awards are the only avenues to establish a legal claim to their children. These men found that obtaining a parenting plan can take much longer than an order to pay child support.

### **Making Choices: Costs and Rewards**

As seen from participants' stories, the majority of the men chose to stay with the mothers of their children at the time of the children's births, to acknowledge paternity, and to provide for their children. Some even chose to marry the mother. In exchange, they expected rewards in that they would have access to their children, even when the relationships with the mothers ended. They feel they have done what has been asked of them. Similar to the findings by Kissman (2001), the fathers who have not paid child support or who have been absent in their child's lives for an extended period of time have the cost of guilt and self-blame that this failure at fathering has produced. At the same time, these fathers felt the mothers should share the blame for the father's lack of involvement. As Kruk (1991) noted, fathers who have previously been highly involved with and attached to their children and then are forced to adapt to a visiting relationship with their children, or no relationship, will likely experience significant emotional hardship. This was found to be true of the participants in this study. Because the fathers feel that they had formed a strong attachment to their children prior to the breakup with the mothers, they have been actively seeking to reestablish the father-child relationship.

### **Reciprocity**

These participants also expected that they would get to see their children on a regular basis in exchange for payment of child support. Some had even initiated court action in order to get a child support order and a parenting plan. However, they have found that, in western Washington, a parenting plan is not arranged at the same time as the child support order and, even when they get a parenting plan, they must rely on the mothers' willingness to have them see their children. When mothers refuse to cooperate, the fathers feel marginalized and excluded from their children's lives. Although their opinions about the mothers' reasons for denying access to their child were not verified, it would appear that some mothers have personal problems of their own, as noted in Table 2, and may not provide the parenting that is best for the children. In addition, the fathers have experienced negative reciprocity when the mothers have refused to let the father see the children because of unresolved anger or resentment toward them, rather than because of any inappropriate parenting.

Behaviors, such as domestic violence, are justifiable reasons for refusing to let a father see his child; however, according to these participants, mothers may also have inappropriate behaviors, including domestic violence or substance abuse. Yet the mothers are still allowed to keep custody of their children. To these participants, fathers' involvement with their children is a privilege based on mothers' prerogatives, fathers' abilities to pay, court biases, and society's stereotypes of noncustodial fathers.

### **Limitations of Study**

Bias was introduced in the selection of participants because all had come to Devoted Dads with an issue around child support and/or parenting; therefore, these men were self-motivated to address these issues. Another limitation to this study is the small sample size. Thus, the results cannot be generalized to the larger population. The literature suggests one partner is likely to incorporate negative feelings toward their nonresident former partner that can distort and discount each other's parental practices (Marsiglio, 1995). No doubt, this might apply to the fathers in this study. However, telling their stories gives men the opportunity to share their beliefs, to dispel some of the stereotypes about noncustodial fathers, and to provoke new ways of thinking about fathering. It also provides a glimpse into their struggles to have ongoing relationships with their children.

### **Conclusions**

The findings of this study clearly contradict the stereotype that fathers have little interest in parenting or in being closely involved with their children. Having a good relationship with their own fathers, paying child support, or being involved in their children's early lives did not make much difference because the mothers made choices about when and if the fathers would see their children, even in cases where parenting plans had been established. Fathers found it necessary to endure an extended legal fight—with courts that may be biased—to spend time with their children, even when there was no evidence of justification for denying parental rights.

Recommendations follow for policies that could reduce the bias that is currently found:

1. Negotiate parenting plans at the same time as child support orders
2. Have the court revisit parenting plans periodically to determine if there have been any changes in the behaviors of mothers or fathers that mandate a change in the amount of time either parent spends with the child.
3. Evaluate the efficacy of joint custody when both parents have been involved with the child.

Too often, fathers have been left out of their child's life or have been seen only as breadwinners. With more children living apart from their fathers, it will become increasingly important to advocate for policies that assist with noncustodial fathers' involvement in their children's lives.

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