III. Daddies and Fathers: Men Who Do for Their Children and Men Who Don't

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This investigation builds on a longstanding interest in the patterns of family formation of *young* parents, particularly on a 20-year longitudinal study of teenage mothers and their children in Baltimore and a national survey of families, which followed children from early childhood to young adulthood.[1] In both studies, how fathers establish and maintain bonds with their children was a central concern. This background of quantitative research grounds the insights and observations provided here from a select and not necessarily representative set of case studies of young black women and some of their male partners; these women and men all participated in a continuing follow-up study of families in the Baltimore research.[2]

About 60 women who were part of this ongoing follow-up study were approached to participate in focus group interviews for this section of the report. In 1991, these women had children of preschool or primary-school age. Within this relatively homogeneous group, an attempt was made to include families in which the parents displayed different degrees of cooperation in child support and child care.

In the spring of 1991, I conducted a focus group with eight of these 60 women, who spoke at length about their relations with the men who had fathered their children. Most were teenagers when their first child was born. One was married to the father of her children, and two others had close ties to the fathers. The other five had strained relationships with their children's fathers or had stopped seeming them altogether. I followed up the focus groups with extended, individual interviews of four women who had been in the group and three men who were their partners, as well as the fiance of one other woman who had not been able to attend.

The members of the focus group and the partner pairs were all black and in their early twenties. But the women's relationships to their children's fathers differed, as did their educational attainment, employment, economic circum-

[1]On the Baltimore study, see F. F. Furstenberg, Jr., *Unplanned Parenthood: The Social Consequences of Teenage Childbearing* (New York: Free Press, 1976); and F. F. Furstenberg, Jr., J. Brooks-Gunn, and S. P. Morgan, *Adolescent Mothers in Later Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). On the national study, see F. F. Furstenberg, Jr., et al., "The Life Course of Children of Divorce: Marital Disruption and Parental Conflict," *American Sociological Review* 48 (1983): 656-668; F. F. Furstenberg, Jr., and C. W. Nord, "Parenting Apart: Patterns of Childbearing After Divorce," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 47 (1985): 893-904; and F. F. Furstenberg, Jr., and K. M. Harris, "When Fathers Matter/Why Fathers Matter: The Impact of Paternal Involvement on the Offspring of Adolescent Mothers," in R. Lerman and T. Ooms, eds., *Young Unwed Fathers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, forthcoming).

[2]J. Brooks-Gunn and P. L. Chase-Lansdale, "Children Having Children: Effects on the Family System," *Pediatric Annals* 20 (1991).

stances, number of children, and current marital status. Their experiences in relating to their children's fathers were quite varied and provide a fairly good indication of the range of experience that young parents have in managing the transition to parenthood. Their accounts suggest how patterns of paternal involvement are affected by cultural standards, economic conditions, family circumstances, and individual differences, all of which have implications for the feasibility of effective child support and programs to promote more active paternal participation in child care.

A word about the veracity of the data: It would be unwise to take the reports of my informants literally. They were certainly aware of the impression they were making in both the group and individual interviews. From time to time, I employed some strategies to jar their efforts at impression management. For example, one young father who presented an ideal statement of his paternal attentions dramatically shifted his account when I asked him what I would overhear if he and his buddies were talking about their children's mothers on the basketball court. I got a knowing smile and a perspective quite different from the one he had been offering up to that point.

But even when I did not use such techniques, I was generally impressed with the openness and sincerity of my informants. After the focus group interview, I learned that five of the eight women who participated had gone home together and continued the conversation in the car. "We kept going on," one informant told me. "We just [kept] talking about—you know—the children's fathers. Some of them are trying to do and some of them are not." Before they left, all the riders exchanged phone numbers and several have been in touch because, as I was told, "all of us are going through the same changes." Similarly, I was struck by how emotionally wrenching the one-on-one interviews were for my informants and me. Several participants thanked me profusely for spending so much time with them. As one young man told me: "I don't find too many people that I can talk to about these sorts of problems." And a woman said: "I was able to get a lot off my chest that I haven't been able to get off—as far as his family and how I really feel about certain things." Then she complained that it was impossible to talk to her friends: "I don't want anybody to tell me what I should do. I just want somebody to listen." Listening, it seems, may be a scarce resource for many of these young people, who seemed to need to articulate complicated and often contradictory feelings about their families, their partners, and their life circumstances.

Because much of the information provided emerged in the course of fairly unstructured conversations, the "data" presented here necessarily take the shape of comments and interchanges. Certain recurrent themes are highlighted. Of course, all the responses were prompted by the kinds of questions I raised, but had I just turned on the tape recorder and listened, I have no doubt that most would have eventually surfaced in their conversations and reflections.

One Case

Angie Tyler had her first child when she was 15. She had not been planning to become pregnant, but she was not too upset when she found out. The child's father, Arnold Green, who was 19, told her that he was willing "to do for the child," to help out with support and child care. Angie's mother was not reassured by Arnold's promises. As Angie described it:

> She wanted to, like every week, keep like going over to [Arnold's family's] house and talk again . . . I guess she was waiting for him to say: "I can't handle it." He said the only person that would have to believe him would be me.

For the next two years after the birth of the child, a daughter, Arnold "did what he said he was going to do." A year after her first birth, Angie became pregnant again. Arnold and his family continued to help out. According to Angie, he did the same for his son as he had for his daughter. But the following year, the relationship became "an on and off again" thing. Arnold's drug and alcohol consumption increased, and he could not be relied upon to support the children.

When Angie became pregnant a third time, Arnold initially denied that the child was his. Angie wanted to get an abortion, but she felt that Arnold undermined her plan. Even though she and her children were now living with Arnold's family, relations between the young couple became extremely strained. Arnold still wanted to "play daddy" in front of his family, but one minute he was "doing for his children" and the next minute he would say: "You the mother. You take care of them." Angie admits that she contributed to the problems she has had with Arnold:

> I mean I'm not going to lie. I did get mean to him. But it didn't mean that I didn't break down the ways and try again . . . until I just got tired or just don't care.

The fighting got worse when Angie developed a new relationship with Ricky Andrews, who became the father of her fourth child. Arnold withdrew even from his family, who were helping to support Angie and the children. Now, five years later, Arnold is still dependent on drugs and alcohol and sees his children very rarely. They know that Arnold is their daddy, but Angie says "he just don't act like it." He hasn't provided any regular economic support for the past three years despite a warrant for his arrest from the child support office.

Ricky Andrews is a different sort of father. By the time they met, Angie and Ricky were both 20 years old. They became good friends before they got sexually involved, but their relationship was never a serious one. When Angie became pregnant, she told Ricky that she was planning to get an abortion. But she changed her mind and decided to keep the child. Having been through so much with Arnold, Angie felt she was better off keeping Ricky at arm's length. She decided not to put his name on the birth certificate and denied she was having his child. Ricky only found out that he was a father when his child was four months old:

> I didn't know about the baby until a friend told me about her. It was like bam! A ton of bricks . . . It was like, why didn't you tell me? That's all I could say . . . I was messed up for a while after that.

Despite the fact that he was already engaged to another woman, Ricky offered to support his daughter and began visiting her regularly. Although Ricky is now married and the father of a second child, his commitment to his older daughter remains undiminished. Despite the fact that he is not legally required to make payments to his first child, Ricky has been a steady provider for three years. When his relationship with Angie became temporarily strained last year, Ricky contacted the Office of Child Support to formalize his support payments. He was told that paternity could only be established by the child's mother, so Ricky dropped his claim. He worries that some day he might be denied access to his child.

There are many fathers like Ricky but, unfortunately, many more who resemble Arnold. Worse yet, there are some who, unlike Arnold, never even set out to meet their paternal responsibilities. No single interpretation emerges from the interviews conducted for this paper to explain why some fathers eschew their responsibilities while others become dedicated dads. The development of paternal responsibility is an open-ended and uncertain process. It is partly determined by the acquisition of certain attitudes and habits in childhood. But the fulfillment of the paternal role also requires a successful negotiation of a difficult series of adult transitions. Without taking full account of the complexity of the process by which paternal responsibility is secured, child support enforcement programs may do little to increase paternal assistance and may even undermine the goal of getting fathers to do their fair share.

"Doing for Your Children"

When Arnold promised Angie that he would "do for his child," she understood what that meant. Among both the women and the men with whom I spoke, there was an unambiguous, universal norm that biological fathers are obligated to support their children. Amy Roberts, one of the women I interviewed, recalled what her child's father told her when she told him she was pregnant. "He said: 'Do whatever you want to do. I'll do what I have to.'" When asked what she understood that to mean, Amy explained:

> That he was going to take care of his daughter. He was going to be the father. Be the man he suppose to be and take care of his responsibilities by taking care of the child . . . That he was going to be there for Nicole when Nicole needed him, and he was going to be there even when she didn't need him . . . take care of her and spend time with her, take her places and everything.

Astoria Exon, a participant in the focus group, described her expectations of the father:

> I guess just being a family . . . To me that's responsible. When the baby needs someone to run to, instead of going to the mother all the time, he can go to his daddy.

The other members of the focus group strongly concurred that being a father involved more than just paying money. It involved sharing the child care responsibility. A number agreed with Chelsea Terrell that men should do their fair share of child-rearing: "Sometimes, the money to me is not even an issue. The quality time means a lot more to a child than the money." This comment prompted a chorus of agreement and the following exchange of views:

> Sometimes when we can't do, they should be able to do—you know.
>
> Just being there when it's time to go to bed. You sit by the bedside and read a book to her.
>
> Or a phone call before she goes to bed.
>
> I agree with her—what she was saying. The money doesn't mean a thing to the kids because they know that they always will get it from either grandparents or the mother. I wouldn't care if he didn't give him nothing, but if he was to spend more time with him, take him to movies, take him to the carnivals, fairs . . . I would have paid child support if he would just spend a little more time with the children.

These strongly worded statements suggest that women clearly give a higher priority to emotional than material support from men. However, most of the women also complained about the father's failure to help out financially. Their comments testify to the strength of their feelings about the importance of fathers sharing child care as part of their paternal obligation. Certainly, financial help is only part of what is involved in "doing for the children."

In conversations with some of the male partners of the women in the group, most fathers appeared to hold similar values. Jordon Jones, the father of Amy Roberts' child, explained that he wants to be a good father to Nicole. What does that involve? "Me taking care of Nicole. Me spending time with Nicole. Me buying her clothes and what else she needs." Later I asked Jordon, who sees his daughter only rarely, what he wants to have happen in the next few years:

> I look at it like this. In the next couple of years I have a nice job, making money, and I be seeing my kids [Jordon has two other children by another woman]. I be seeing my daughter on the weekends or something like that. Or when she start school this year, picking her up from school and taking her home.

Jordon paused and acknowledged, without my ever asking, that his hopes are unlikely to come true. While recognizing the importance of emotional care, the men put greater emphasis on their ability—or inability—to provide steady economic support. Women may accept that a man can "do for his child" without providing regular assistance, but the men seemed to doubt that their emotional relationship with their children could be fully credited unless it was backed up by material assistance. Men were inclined to view their failure to supply

financial help as the more egregious violation of their paternal duties. Ricky Andrews, who has been an exemplary provider, spoke with contempt of fathers who don't do for their children: "[Men] who just make the babies and are not willing to pay are just dummies." Then Ricky went on to draw a distinction between those men who just father children and the daddies who actually care for them.

Almost everyone I spoke to—men and women alike—recognized the cultural difference between a father and a daddy. Fathers were generally described as the person who made the child and daddies as the person (whether the biological progenitor or someone else) who took care of him or her. (Some members of the group made a similar distinction but reversed the terms, reserving the term "father" for men who assume full responsibility for their children.) Ricky, for example, reported that his cousin's child approached him one day and said: "Don't tell my mother, but could you be my daddy?" "I was lost for a second," Ricky reported. "It was kind of deep." He told the child that it would be all right for her to call him daddy. But he said that he is not really doing for her what daddies are expected to do: "It doesn't bother me," he says, "because their father's not there."

Assessing a similar situation, Beebee Evers, another member of the focus group, suggested that "if they [fathers] was there, they [their children] would know the difference. That's the big problem."

Techniques of Neutralization

Among the informants for this investigation, there was little disagreement on what men should do for their children, but, not surprisingly, explanations differed for why and how it happens that men relinquish or reduce their paternal role. Men who were uninvolved with their children were reluctant to acknowledge it openly; instead, they explained their noncompliance by what Sykes and Matza referred to as "techniques of neutralization," socially patterned accounts for justifying why it was necessary or acceptable to disengage from the widely accepted norms of paternity.[3] This does not mean that the explanations offered by the males had no validity. But, justifiable or not, they represent cultural contrivances for avoiding blame or moral responsibility.

"It's not my child."

Everyone I spoke to agreed that fathers are only responsible for children when they are the child's progenitor. (Becoming a social daddy is appreciated and widely practiced but not required even when marriage or cohabitation occurs.) Therefore, men may absolve themselves of responsibility if they are convinced and are able to convince others that they are not the biological father. In the Baltimore study, a fifth of the males reported that a sexual partner had

[3]G. M. Sykes and D. Matza, "Techniques of Neutralization: A Theory of Delinquency," *American Sociological Review* 22 (1957): 664-673.

said they were responsible for a pregnancy that they did not acknowledge. Of course, not all these pregnancies were brought to term, but contested fatherhood is hardly a rare event. It was an issue for several of the parents I interviewed.

"Someone else has taken my place."

Although not as socially compelling, men sometimes justify their low paternal commitment by claiming that they have been pushed out. Jordon explained that he had been displaced by Amy's fiance, who was taking over his legitimate role. Although he acknowledged that he had not been doing enough for his child, he felt he was not being given a chance to show what he could do.

"My support isn't going for the child."

Men sometimes claim that their payments are not benefiting their children because they are diverted by their children's mother or other members of the household. They complained that women are "materialistic" and constantly looking for ways of getting money from them. The fathers' feelings of distrust could be summed up in the sentiment: "They always be asking for money for themselves, not they kids."

"I don't have the money."

The most frequent reason for nonsupport, according to the fathers who are not paying, is that they do not have the funds. Unstable employment contributes to the male's sense that he cannot be expected to provide regular support. I was told by men that they help out when they can, but that they often simply do not have the funds. Also, many fathers have children by more than one mother and face a constant barrage of requests for help. "Sometimes me and my buddies get together," Jordon told me, "and we be like say why do we have so many kids? And it's hard."

"She don't let me see my child."

Nonsupport and inconsistent fathering often produce a spiral of conflict between the parents, which leads fathers to believe that they are "locked out" of their children's lives. Indeed, many of the mothers reported that they did not trust the father to be with the child. Males may then justify their nonsupport by saying that they are being deprived of their paternal rights and that women have a "nasty attitude" toward them.

Women's Views of Men's Accounts of Why They Don't Help Out

The females I spoke to were well versed in these techniques of neutralization, which they generally regarded as cynical evasions or lame excuses for why

fathers don't do for their children. The women had a different set of accounts for why men withdraw from their children, which emanated from a powerful set of beliefs about why men cannot be trusted.

"Men are spoiled."

The notion that less is expected from men was a recurrent theme in the focus group and the individual interviews. Many of the women complained that, from childhood, boys are treated with more indulgence than girls. They are taught to be irresponsible, I was told. Beebee Landreau, who was engaged to be married to the father of her child, described her fiance with some fondness and some exasperation: "He still acts like a baby. I mean like another one of my children." Someone else volunteered: "I think that's all men." Heads nodded in agreement around the table.

"Men can't accept the responsibilities of parenthood."

Closely related to the belief that most men were not as self-sacrificing as women was the view that they were unwilling to forgo their own pleasures for their children. Not everyone I spoke to subscribed to this blanket condemnation of men, but the idea that men are more selfish than women was generally accepted. Wanda Miller complained that Lionnel, her child's father, was unwilling to part with his money. "I don't have to do this," Lionnel would tell her when she asked him for money to buy the child Pampers. He would say that he was doing the best he could. "He really wasn't," Wanda continued. "He wasn't even trying to. He's just made a kid, and he's a father. That was it." Most women I spoke to agreed with Wanda that men could not be relied upon to do their fair share. Lydia Robinson told the focus group: "Jason's father, you know, he's not stupid—nothing like that. He just lazy. He just doesn't want to do it."

"Men aren't ready to become fathers."

Most women felt that they had become parents too soon. But they were even more convinced that the fathers of their children became parents before they were ready. Unlike the men, who were more inclined to view their unemployment as caused by the unavailability of work, women stressed the men's unwillingness and inability to hold jobs once they found them. If pushed hard, women acknowledged that poor jobs played a part in men's reluctance to accept employment, but they pointed out that they were expected to hold jobs that their boyfriends considered to be unacceptable.

Gender Mistrust

Suspicion of men's motives and their capacities to undertake parenthood led many of the women to discount, and perhaps sometimes to distort, men's efforts to remain involved in their children's lives. The sharp division in the accounts

of men and women is a vivid expression of the profound gender mistrust that pervades the cultural setting in which these young people are growing up.

Most had seen their fathers retreat from their family and had been raised predominantly by women. To be sure, almost all were exposed to models of reliable and trustworthy males, but the women complained that these men were in short supply. The men, in turn, were laboring, frequently unsuccessfully, to demonstrate that they could do better for their children than their fathers had done for them. The differing accounts offered by men and women of why fathers withdraw provide a complex cultural script that is played out during the transition to parenthood. Men and women exchange promises, promises are often broken, and then blame is apportioned for the unkept promises.

There is another side to this gloomy scenario of distrust and failure. Almost everyone I spoke to, men and women alike, operated with a dual script. If they were equipped to accept failure, it did not mean that they did not retain the hope—even the expectation—that they might succeed in creating a successful relationship and a stable family. All shared the ideal of establishing a marriage-like relationship, if not a marriage, and raising children with their partner. For some this represented a distant and perhaps elusive goal; for others it was close to being realized. One man and woman I interviewed had plans to marry. Another woman was already wed. Two other parents had managed to establish a cordial, or at least workable, relationship.

Preparation for Parenthood

What are the circumstances that may contribute to a successful accommodation to early parenthood? An adequate explanation must take account of the personal attributes and situation of *both* parents and their respective families. Obviously my information is often incomplete or, sometimes, seen from the eyes of only one party. But a closer look at the different perspectives of men and women suggests how they create a dynamic that leads to successful collaboration or, more frequently, disengagement.

When Amy became pregnant, she and Jordon had been going together for just three months. She told me that she became pregnant the first time the couple had sex. "And a couple of weeks later—after we broke up—I told [Jordon] I was pregnant." Jordon, who already had two children, reported his recollection of the conversation in which Amy informed him that she was pregnant: "I told her to get an abortion. But she didn't." Amy remembered it differently. According to her, Jordon promised to "do what he had to do." Possibly each recalled a different part of the conversation or perhaps merely what they wanted to say or hear.

None of the couples I spoke to had planned to become pregnant, nor had any other women in the focus group intended to have their child when they did. Each described her pregnancy as an accident, even though several women were not especially upset to learn that they were pregnant. Two other women besides Amy stated that they had become pregnant the first time they had sex with their child's father. While most women had been going with the father before the pregnancy occurred, several, like Amy, were in the process of breaking up when

they became pregnant. In several instances, either the initiation of sex or the occurrence of pregnancy contributed to the demise of the relationship.

Because I was speaking to women whose first birth occurred in their teen years, it is not surprising to observe that emotional and sexual relations were short-lived and fragile. Weak investment in the relationship prior to pregnancy makes it very difficult to establish a strong commitment to parental cooperation following the birth. Jordon, after promising to "do for his child," disappeared for eight months, only reappearing after his daughter was born. He was not the only father—as we learn from the women in the focus group—to break off relations during pregnancy, and not the only one to return after a period of prolonged absence.

> Beebee: Most of them stop visiting once they found out the girl was pregnant.
>
> Amy: Yeah.
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> Beebee: That's how most of them are. I mean they get scared away.
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> Chelsea: That's the responsibility of the father.
>
> Beebee: Yeah. They got to grow up.
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> Chelsea: Even when they're older, some of them—not even the younger [fathers]—they're scared.

In answer to my question: "Why are they scared of the responsibility?"

> Chelsea: I guess failing, maybe failing the child or not standing up to the mother's standards or something. It takes too much for them.
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> Amy: Not being able to—when the child come to you specifically and ask for something—they scared because they might not be able to get it to them at that particular time.
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> Angie: He wasn't scared. He just spoiled and he always had everything his way [by his mother] . . . I guess his child's mother is supposed to do it so he's not afraid of anything.

This discussion turned to a series of observations and illustrations about how men are spoiled by their mothers, how selfish they are, and how ill-prepared they are for the responsibilities of parenthood.

The women in the group varied in their explanations for why men often withdrew during the women's pregnancy. Fear of failure, immaturity, and self-indulgence were all mentioned. These explanations are not as different as they might seem at first blush. All may have a common root in the socialization experiences of many young men in urban ghettos. Lionnel recalled how his father disappeared shortly after he was born. He told me that he "wants to be there for his son." But, according to Wanda, Lionnel has virtually stopped seeing the boy and has never paid child support. Wanda blames Lionnel's inability to make good on his intentions on his family history, though her account is characteristically bitter:

> He was the only child for a long time and he was raised by his mother by herself. And he always talked about his father all the time. So, when Lionnel, Jr., was born, he always talked about what he was going to do for him. Things his father didn't do for him. He turned out and did just the same as far as his kids. He's not around for them.

Wanda observed—perhaps speaking both for Lionnel and herself—that he's "got a lot of bitterness in him." She commented afterwards that she should have known what to expect because her father behaved the same toward her and her brothers.

I asked Jordon, who is a lot like Lionnel, about his friends who have become fathers. He replied: "All my friends—well, not all of them—are basically struggling like I am." He then explained how his friends really are not able to command any respect from their children. They "ain't brought up with manners and discipline." Both he and Lionnel seem to be caught in a pattern of reproducing the circumstances of their own childhood.

Based on the small number of interviews I conducted, it is presumptuous to speak of regularities in the results. Nonetheless, I was struck by the contrasts in the family experience of the two men I interviewed who were assuming responsibility for their children. Ricky, who had to overcome Angie's persistent doubts about his willingness to care for his child, described how, after a series of tests of his resolve, he finally convinced her that his daughter was his first priority. Ricky acknowledged that he feels more strongly than men who are only there for their children sometimes and who care for them only to "ease their conscience or look good in public." I asked Ricky why he is different from these other guys: "I don't know. Maybe I believe in . . . it's my blood. When the child started calling me 'daddy' . . . God! Pretty special."

I then asked Ricky whether he had been frightened by the responsibility. He acknowledged that many guys cannot handle the responsibility:

> It's like anything else. If you owning a car, you are responsible for paying for it. If you living alone, you responsible for paying for it. If you work, you responsible for showing up and doing your job. So why can't you be responsible for taking care of your child?

I pressed Ricky, pointing out that children require lots of money. "I don't really care for money. I only work because I have to." If you dislike working so much, I asked him, why not let the child be supported by the child's mother or her family? Ricky admits that he knows guys who do that, but he does not "want somebody else . . . to take my weight."

How did he come to hold those views? Ricky described how his mother died when he was 12 and he was taken in by a brother, who was 18 years older than him:

> He would work and go home, work and go home. Get to me where I don't want him to have to take care of me . . . seeing him give and give and give.

Ricky started working with his brother to help pay the bills and got in the habit of sharing the responsibility. "I guess," he reflects, as if he had never thought about it before, "it was being around a give-type person. A person that took care and was responsible—set some kind of example for me."

Ricky was not the only father I talked to who had acquired a strong sense of "procreative consciousness and responsibility"—the term used by Phillips Cutright to describe the deep commitment to caring for one's children.[4] Vernon Wood is engaged to Tami McDonald, who did not participate in the focus group because she could not take time off from work. Vernon and Tami had been "friends" for almost five years before Tami became pregnant. According to Vernon, the pregnancy was a "misplanned accident," but the timing did not make much difference to either of them. He was working at the time, but having a child "slowed things down" in his plans to live together with Tami. He contributes "automatically." By this he means that he pays regularly, though, like Ricky, he pays informally—that is, directly to the mother rather than through the Office of Child Support. "I just know what he needs . . . If I can afford it, I get it." Most of Vernon's close friends who have children feel the same way.

I asked Vernon about how he came to feel so strongly about supporting his child. "It really has to start from home . . . Some parents just don't care." When I pushed him on the influences in his life, he jokingly replied:

> What do you say? Mama's boy. Whatever people want to say. My mother just looked after me. She looked after her kids . . . My mother was always there, you know. Do your work, do your work . . . Most kids don't respect their parents. In other words, they can't look at their parents as role models 'cause they not nothing themselves.

The conversation turned to the way most children are being raised in Vernon's neighborhood. Vernon complained that many children are not being taken care of—even by their mothers.

Ricky and Vernon see themselves as different from many of the people in their neighborhood. Ricky reported that he is one of the few young men who work at a regular job in his community, though he thinks others are beginning to feel they might be better off if they found steady employment. While neither of these young men is self-righteous about his life choices, it is clear that they believe many of their peers are not raised to take responsibility for themselves and therefore cannot assume responsibility for their children.

In fact, the fathers who do for their children and the fathers who don't offer similar accounts of why some men are good providers. I asked Jordon, whose behavior departs from his own expressed ideals, to tell me what I would hear if I were to listen to him and his friends talk about caring for their children. Jordon began a short and expressive monologue of what happens when girl-

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[4]P. Cutright, "Child Support and Responsible Male Procreative Behavior," *Sociological Focus* 19 (1986): 27-45. See also W. Marsiglio, "Commitment to Social Fatherhood: Predicting Adolescent Males' Intentions to Live with Their Child and Partner," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 50 (1988): 427-441.

friends ask guys to buy Pampers for their children. (Pampers figure heavily in the conversations of both men and women because they are both concrete and emblematic expressions of men's willingness to meet the daily requirements of child care.)

> Sometimes me and my buddies get together and we be saying: "I, like, well, *you* go buy them because I ain't buying those Pampers. I done that plenty of times." [Pause] I used to be like that for a while until I really sat down by myself and ask what I accomplish out of life—which was making babies. That is all I got.

Jordon then told me of his plans to get a job or perhaps try to go into the service so his kids would be taken care of by the government: "[Then] I won't have to worry about that [whether they will be well provided for]."

Jordon has held a number of different jobs over the past several years, though none of them have worked out. Amy had her own explanation for Jordon's unstable work history. She said that every time Jordon's employer is told that he owes child support, he quits. "Jordon won't keep a job for more than three months. As soon as they find out, he's gone."

The failure of men to support their children can no doubt be traced to structural sources rooted in racial discrimination, labor market conditions, and economic deprivation. But few of the young people to whom I spoke—even the unemployed males—dwelled on these more distant sources of their difficulties. They were more inclined to subscribe to the strong belief that the men who make the children should also care for them. Jordon condemned his buddies' behavior just as Wanda condemned his.

Like Ricky and Vernon, Wanda and Jordon believe that men do not take responsibility because they are not brought up with the expectation that they must take care of themselves. Wanda complained that her mother is training her brothers that way:

> They sleep all day long and stay out all night long. Fifty and $100 tennis shoes—my mother give them the money to sit around at home. I wasn't brought up that way.

There was a general consensus—among men and women, good and poor providers alike—that many fathers enter parenthood untrained and ill-prepared. Limited exposure to appropriate role models, and failure to acquire attitudes and habits that lead young men to take demanding and often unrewarding jobs, was usually cited when the men and women I spoke to talked about men being ill-prepared for parenthood. Many informants spoke of the need of males "to get the running out of them" before they are ready to settle down. Whether women had similar needs was the subject of some disagreement. Most felt that women's family experiences were more conducive to training them for responsibility, though they conceded that they were "forced to learn on the job."

Weak Ties and Unstable Bonds: Relations Between Parents

Young parents often enter parenthood uncertain about their commitment to one another. As time goes on, their self-doubts frequently grow with the experience of trying to raise a child together. But even in the small number of cases that I observed, tremendous variability existed in the commitment to trying to work out relations. At one end of the continuum are cases where parental obligations are contested from conception; at the other end are couples who are able to negotiate a stable and friendly relationship or those who pursue the traditional path of marriage. Most fall in between these two extremes: Their ability to be cooperative wavers as their relationship fluctuates. Typically, though not invariably, waning emotional ties between parents signal their inability to share parental duties.

Contested Parenthood

Paternity carries an unambiguous claim for support, I was told, but I also learned that establishing paternity was sometimes far from automatic. Angie was able to persuade Ricky that he was the child's biological father, even after she had given the child another father's name. But Chelsea Terrell was still trying to convince the family of the man she said was the father of her child. Despite his protestations to the contrary, they were convinced he was not responsible for the pregnancy and hence not obliged to support her child.

The informants who participated in this study no doubt underrepresented the incidence of contested paternity. Legal paternity had been established for all participants in the focus group, but even so, two members had come close to getting a "blood test." While this procedure is considered by child support officials to be a standard protection in contested paternity cases, I got the impression that requesting evidence of paternity in this way conveys the ultimate absence of trust, making cooperation thereafter difficult. It is far better to come to a private agreement based on less intrusive methods, most notably familial resemblance.

Chelsea Terrell recalls that her baby's father initially doubted paternity: "He asked me would I get a blood test. So after I had the baby, we was supposed to have got the blood test, but he saw that she looks just like him, as they say." Beebee Evers reports an almost identical experience to Chelsea's. As in the case of Chelsea, the father's family refused to acknowledge his responsibility and insisted on a blood test. "And then we finally got together and we talked it out. He looked at my son [and said]: 'He look just like me.'" The father's paternity was not completely resolved for other members of his family until a medical examination several years later revealed that the child needed glasses. The father, too, had poor eyesight and had required glasses as a young child. Because cooperation between parents requires establishing and building trust, the paternity test can be thought of as a "last resort" measure. It is only employed when the likely conditions for support are lacking altogether. Paradoxically, the establishment of paternity by a blood test may be associated with noncompliance with child support or low paternal involvement.

Paternity as a Package Deal

Most fathers do pledge paternal support and involvement. At the time of pregnancy and in the year or so after the child is born, caretaking is usually at a high point. Disengagement often takes place over time, not infrequently even after the parents have lived together or had subsequent children, as occurred with Angie and Arnold. A primary reason for their declining commitment can be traced to the vicissitudes of the young couple's emotional relationship. With formerly married men, retreat from their children often occurs because marriage is regarded as a "package deal"—that is, obligations to support their children are indirectly mediated by emotional ties to the child's mother.[5] It is almost as if many fathers saw their child care responsibilities as part of an umbrella contract with their children's mother. This same sort of understanding seems to apply as well to men who never marry their child's mother.

Amy complained that Jordon was only willing to support the kids as long as they were emotionally involved. She acknowledged that Jordon was taking care of Nicole until "I told him that the feelings that I had for him at first weren't there any more—I wasn't in love with him." Amy reported that Jordon told her: "How do you expect me to take care of Nicole if we are not together?" She said: "You can still take care of Nicole. You just don't have to be with me to do it." According to her, Jordon replied: "I'm not going to do for one if I ain't going to do for two if I can't be with you both." Though Amy was able to get Jordon to agree to child support, he made only one payment after they stopped seeing each other. My subsequent interview with Jordon largely corroborated Amy's account that his commitment to supporting his child was linked to his bond with Amy. Jordon is still hurt that Amy broke up with him and is confused about his obligations to Nicole now that his former girlfriend is about to marry someone else. He now thinks that Amy gets in the way between him and his daughter, but he also adds that he has "no hard feelings against Amy. She just don't care for me."

Several other women complained that their decision to get out of a relationship with their child's father ultimately provoked his withdrawal from paternal responsibilities. When Angie became pregnant with her third child, Arnold told his family that the child was not his because by that time "me and him was on and off." As soon as their relationship ended, "he was knocking his responsibility already in one day." When I asked Angie how Arnold would explain why he pulled away from his kids, she said that he would say she didn't care about him. And Wanda recalls that when she separated because she "couldn't take it anymore," her child's father immediately stopped seeing her son. "It was like he was going to punish me" for "not being with him." Fulfillment of paternal responsibilities is seen by some men as a *quid pro quo* for continuing an emotional relationship that involves caring for them as well.

I asked the couples who were managing to cooperate whether the father would maintain involvement if their relationship soured. The responses were

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[5]F. F. Furstenberg, Jr., and A. J. Cherlin, *Divided Families: What Happens to Children When Parents Part* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

mixed. One believed that their ties were not contingent on an ability to get along with each other; the others felt that if trust broke down between them, they were uncertain how it might affect their capacity to cooperate in child-rearing. Ricky was one of those who feared that if he didn't remain "friendly" with Angie, she might make it difficult for him to continue to see his child. His comments highlighted the fact that women, too, adopt umbrella contracts. They are also capable of obstructing relations between fathers and their children when their emotional loyalties to their former partners wane.

Entangling Relationships

Young relationships are often short-lived. All but two of the women I spoke to were no longer emotionally involved with the fathers of their child, though several continued friendships with them. The succession of relationships has important implications for a couple's pattern of collaboration in much the same way that remarriage affects the patterns of involvement of formerly married couples.[6] Although no disagreement exists that biological parents retain responsibility for their children, in reality allowances are made when other men take on the role of social parent. Even though everyone interviewed subscribed to a belief that obligations endure, many appeared to discount or readjust their sense of what should actually happen when another man is living with the children.

Amy's impending marriage complicated Jordon's already tenuous relationship to his daughter. He complained that he was being displaced by another man. At first, Jordon made a renewed commitment to become reconnected to his child, especially after he heard Nicole refer to Amy's fiance as "daddy." Amy did not deny that her fiance, who treats Nicole "as a real father should," is displacing Jordon. And Jordon admitted that when Amy called his household to say that Nicole needed something, his mother kept encouraging him to "let her new boyfriend get it." Now that Amy has stopped calling, he told me: "It has me wondering." Jordon explained that he feels conflicted over his obligations.

Jordon is not alone. Shifting relationships are a major source of attenuation in child support and involvement for a number of the informants. Women give up on the child's father and place their hopes in their new partner, who usually expresses a willingness to assume care for any children residing in her household. Because relations with former partners are usually strained, it is generally easier for women to accept the father's departure as the price of keeping conflict low. Wanda explained to me:

> I would like her to know who her father is, but sometime when I think about it, I don't want her to know. Just because of the type of person he is . . . The guy I'm with now makes Lionnel look real small.

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[6]See Furstenberg and Nord, "Parenting Apart."

So the politics of current domestic arrangements undermine a commitment to recognized moral and legal commitments. Biological fathers' longstanding obligations are, in effect, written off as "bad debts" by women who see their present partners as potentially more reliable providers. Biological fathers should pay, but getting them to comply is often viewed as more trouble than it is worth.

Men, in turn, are inclined to see their present relationships as more emotionally compelling. Given limited emotional and material resources, they must make a difficult choice between preserving ties with their biological children and forging relations with a new family. Over time, then, the fathers' obligations often come to be discounted by both them and the mothers of their children.

Obligation Overload

To make a bad situation even worse, some men like Arnold or Jordon, who have limited resources to begin with, accumulate crushing obligations early in life. At 23, Jordon, who is only occasionally employed, has three children to support. Angie stated that Arnold cannot be located, even by the Office of Child Support, but Angie reported that he has no fewer than four children. Most men who father children early in life are not as overburdened as Jordon or Arnold, but a relatively small number of men with a large number of obligations do present a special problem to women and the child support system.

Is it worth trying to collect from these overtaxed and unreliable sources? Wanda told me that she never really pressed Lionnel to pay child support: "I really never pushed the issue about it because he wasn't going to do it anyway." Wanda recalled with a trace of bitterness that Lionnel went down to the Office of Child Support and told them that he could not pay for either of his children. He was told that eventually he would have to start paying, but nothing ever happened. Like other women I spoke to in Wanda's circumstances, she has given up on the father, written him off as a "bad debt."

The contrast to the men who were providing regular support for their children was again striking. Not only did all of them have steady employment, but they also had been able to restrict and carefully manage the demands made upon them. Vernon had only one child and had waited for eight years before getting married. Speaking of why he had waited so long to get married, he told me that sometimes it was depressing to realize that "you can't just decide that you can do whatever you want." But "I just didn't want to go into it not having enough money." Vernon expects that maybe he and Tami will have just one more child.

The fathers who are able to do for their children are exceptionally good at managing their limited resources. They are often receiving help from their families, who frequently share and reinforce their strong responsibility ethic. But it also seems clear that some of these young couples are leading a precarious existence, given the high demands and relatively meager resources available to them. Their resolve to manage is impressive, but it is evident that their reserves could be overdrawn if a crisis were to occur. For example, how steadfast will

Ricky's commitments to supporting his daughter be when the costs of his second family grow? Ricky is already working two jobs to provide enough support.

The inability to accumulate resources, of course, is linked to the limited economic prospects available to all of the families in this study. The men who were managing had done so in part by avoiding excessive family demands. Most of the men who were not managing had by an early age become impossibly overloaded with claims that they could not honor. For several of these men, employment only reminds them of their unmet obligations. If Vernon sometimes feels depressed about his prospects, it is hard to describe the despair that Jordon and Lionnel feel. At the end of his interview, I asked Jordon what could be done to help fathers like him. He started telling me about a friend of his, Roy, who as he went on became a surrogate for himself:

> When his first kid was born, Roy was all about that kid. But as he just constantly was messing with other girls besides his main girl, they pop up pregnant every time. Right now, he's tired of this girl's nagging about the kids. Roy's like me, he wants to do the right thing. He wants to be with his kids. He wants to have a nice home and have his kids stay. He can't get out of the neighborhood that he is in. If he try, somebody will pull him back in.

Impressions of the Child Support System

Most of the people I spoke to felt that the Office of Child Support was more a part of the problem than of the solution. There was no one who had not had at least some contact with the Office of Child Support, which the residents of Baltimore City referred to simply as "downtown." While everyone I spoke to endorsed the principle of child support, they were generally disgusted with the way the current system operates. In the focus group, Beebee Evers seemed to sum up the feelings of everyone around the table when she declared: "The system sucks . . . It really does because . . . the guys go down there and still don't pay anything." Her comment prompted a round of complaints about downtown.

"Everything gets lost in the mail."

The most frequent criticism of child support was that the system does not work. After a round of disparaging comments in the focus group about the way things work downtown, I remarked: "I hear a lot of you saying you don't have much faith in the system here." The responses were similar:

> Angie: Not at all.
>
> Amy: That's no joke.
>
> Lydia: "We mailed it off two weeks ago."
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> Amy: "You should have had it, and I don't know what happened."

> Lydia: And then when they lose a check, and you got to go down there and look through all these checks . . . I don't know how many checks that I haven't received.

Complaints about the inefficiency of the system were rampant. In both the focus group and interviews, I was regaled with stories about the system's inability to collect payments. Beebee describes the former partner of one of her friends:

> Now he works for the city. Why can't they just snatch him up real quick and fast? I don't think that they are doing anything about it. I really don't.

Candy Jeffries, another member of the group, explained that the system makes it impossible to file a claim. "It is messed up now" because of the lack of personnel. "You tell them your complaint, and they'll mail it back. You don't even get to talk to nobody." Amy Roberts added:

> I called down to the building. They gave me a number, an ID number. And I'm like—what am I going to do with this? What is it for?

Beebee asked her if she wrote them a letter. And Amy replied sardonically: "Yeah, write them a letter. My mother did that. She was like—don't do it. You're not going to get any justice." Amy says that she ignored her mother's advice and wrote to the system. Six months later nothing had happened. "And I know he works . . . He owes it to my child. But like you said, the system sucks because they are not doing anything."

"They give up on the fathers that don't pay."

As the comments above indicate, most women thought that the system was not really interested in pursuing the men who held out. Other women bitterly protested that men who defied the system generally got away with it. Several reported that attempts to garnish their child's father's wages only backfired. They claimed the men responded by quitting their jobs when they were told that they would have to pay back child support. In the focus group, the women reported that the child support system succeeded in scaring the men, but there was little follow through. "Don't scare them," Amy said, "do it. The only way that it would probably have helped Jordon is just stop scaring him, just throw him in jail, period." She wanted downtown to be tougher. A few other women shared her view that if the system were tougher, there might be more compliance.

Others in the group had their doubts that tougher enforcement was possible or even that it would be a deterrent in their families. Wanda, for example, claimed that Lionnel would just defy attempts at getting tough. In any event, even if he were thrown in jail, it would not help her kids. It seemed that some women despaired of getting any cooperation from resistant fathers who had little to lose by refusing to comply.

And the men I spoke to—both those who paid and those who did not—were not any more sanguine about getting the system to operate more effectively. Some favored tougher sanctions. Others thought that approach would not work. But almost all agreed that the system was too impersonal to be responsive to people's needs. Ricky, with a mixture of concern and scorn, described how he had been discouraged from paying child support by the bureaucratic rules. He, like other fathers, preferred to pay child support directly or "under the table," believing that the money was more likely to reach his children. The practice of paying outside the system was common. Vernon told me that he simply took care of his child's expenses without a formal agreement.

"The money doesn't get to the children, anyway."

Ricky's view that paying into the system often does not work to the child's benefit was held by other informants. Several women who had received cash assistance described how child support payments were used to pay back the welfare system:

> They sent me a letter [and] told me that they would continue on taking his taxes until the full amount [for back assistance] is paid up.

This procedure of linking child support to the repayment of welfare had the effect of making both the father and mother feel that the money that came into the system was not going to support their children. For some men, this was a further excuse to evade payments; for some women, the low payoff from the system discouraged them from cooperating in efforts to locate the father. For both men and women, it reinforced the impression that downtown was more of an interference than a source of assistance. They were convinced that the system was not designed to help them out.

Misinformation

Negative attitudes about the child support system evidently were mixed with some misinformation about how the system should work. Some women on public assistance were aware of the pass-through procedure, by which a mother receives the first $50 per month of a father's child support payments and the rest goes to repay the state for the family's welfare benefits. However, such knowledge did not seem to carry much weight with them or with the fathers. Several informants were confused about the linkage between child support and welfare. The belief that the child support system seemed to be largely designed to collect for previous public assistance payments undermined its legitimacy in the eyes of a number of the people I spoke to.

Implications for Policy and Parents' Fair Share

The focus group and individual interviews with young parents reported here offer both some reasons to hope that an intervention such as Parents' Fair Share can make a difference in their children's lives and reasons to be cautious. While employment training and job placement will help some young fathers, others are not likely to respond to simple economic inducements. Many of these young fathers have been in and out of employment; they have not found the experience sufficiently rewarding to settle into a regular job. Many do not have the skills, maturity, or determination to adhere to a routine that will make them steady providers and good prospects as partners to their children's mothers. In time, some of these men will "get the running out of them" and probably become more reliable partners, but others are likely to lead a transient existence unless their lives take a dramatic turn.

Clearly, there is a sobering message in what the women (and several of the men) have said: Attempts at involving some of the fathers are likely to meet with frustration. I experienced some of this frustration as I tried to recruit male informants to participate in the case studies. I had no trouble locating fathers who were involved in their children's upbringing. But despite the fact that I was offering large financial incentives for an interview, I had limited success in reaching some of the fathers whose contact with their children was episodic, even when the mothers supplied names and telephone numbers. One of the men I reached denied he was the father.

It is also clear from these retrospective accounts that most couples would have been better off if the pregnancy had not occurred when it did. Virtually every young parent I talked to—even those who were successfully managing their parental responsibilities—stated that in retrospect they should have postponed their first birth. When I asked the focus group what measures could help young men, several of the participants thought that more programs for males in the schools would be helpful: "They've got a lot for the females but not for the males."

Much more can be done than is being done to disabuse young men and women of the romantic illusion associated with establishing a family early in life. While parenthood was rarely intended, both young mothers and fathers deceived themselves and each other by fostering wildly excessive expectations, while at the same time harboring secret doubts and fears. It is important to continue to spread the message that men do not make children they cannot care for. It would be useful to provide assistance to young couples at the time a pregnancy is first discovered so that they can enter into a more realistic dialogue. The case studies revealed that what little is communicated between couples is frequently misconstrued and distorted. It is also evident that pregnancy sometimes precipitates a panic reaction on the part of men. Hearing that they are about to become fathers, males not infrequently flee their imminent responsibilities, leaving bewildered mothers and scornful families to pick up the pieces.

Young fathers have internalized a double script. They want to do better for their children than their fathers did for them, but they also have learned to fear

(perhaps even expect) failure in fatherhood. Support, encouragement, advice, and assistance are sorely needed for young men who justly have doubts about their capacity to assume paternal responsibilities. Similarly, women who sense the fathers' doubts may be helped to understand rather than react to men's fears. Many couples, it seems, participate unwittingly in a dialogue that recapitulates family histories and reinforces gender expectations.

As Jordon spoke about what would help the people he knew, he wanted services for young fathers like himself that would help them learn "how to play that role." He admitted that many fathers would not participate at first. But eventually such a father would come out to the meetings and "feel better about himself and think about what he is doing wrong and what he need do." I sensed in Jordon a desperate need to gain confidence about his ability to provide for his children. Certainly, part of gaining that confidence involves finding steady employment, but Jordon's erratic work patterns also reflect his wavering commitments to participating in the world of work.

Another pressing need is to work with young people both before and after they become parents to learn to overcome the powerful feelings of distrust they feel for members of the opposite sex. These interviews illustrate attitudes and beliefs that are deeply embedded in recurrent historical circumstances and reinforced by current realities, portraying most men as irresponsible, immature, and selfish, and women as demanding, discontented, and long-suffering.

Beebee Evers told me that she is often asked why she and Harold have not become enemies after all they have been through. They were so different when they first met eight years ago. Beebee was brought up by her mother "not to depend on a man . . . because he could leave you today or tomorrow." At one time, she threatened to leave Harold because "he was so lazy." Beebee says she pushed him into growing up: "He saw I was working two jobs plus taking care of the kids and keeping the house clean and everything." Then she reflects: "We grew up with each other. It's just we was there for each other when we needed to be." Cases such as Beebee and Harold need greater visibility in a world where many men and women doubt their ability to create lasting partnerships.

Problems in sustaining or dissolving emotional relations between parents are a central concern. The transition to parenthood is often occurring among expectant parents who barely know one another. While it is difficult to get previously married couples to collaborate, it is even more difficult to work out patterns of cooperation among adolescents and young adults who have limited skills and experience getting along with one another, and who may still be involved in attaining independence from their respective families. Mediation and counseling services are much needed to help young couples work out plans for child care and support. Court systems are unlikely to be able to impose domestic arrangements—even monetary ones—that have not been arrived at by mutual consent. And even such solutions worked out in good faith must be monitored and reinforced if they are likely to ripen into successful child arrangements.

Finally, hostility toward the child support system was pervasive among the informants for this report. There are many barriers to gaining cooperation from women who feel that the system is uninterested and unresponsive to their needs

and from men who believe that they are being unfairly pursued and that it does not help their children. In many respects, the current system is coming to be viewed in the same light as the welfare and criminal justice bureaucracies. This has to be addressed if poor children are to benefit. I was impressed by how much informal resistance to child support was evident among the very people whom it was designed to help.