



follow up notes - 01 fatherhood and child welfare

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Thanks for your recent participation in Fatherhood and Child Welfare, a simulation and workshop designed to identify opportunities for involving fathers effectively in children's lives where appropriate. We hope you have been able to apply some of the competencies explored in the training and have implemented the goals you set for yourself as a result of the experience.

As promised, we are sending this note to provide additional information about fathers and the child welfare system. This edition includes information on about the importance of fathers in healthy development as well as tools for dialog to support the importance of understanding each father and each family member as an individual.

Such understanding is especially important in light of dynamics with maltreating fathers. To suggest that all fathers will have a healthy relationship with their children is not only inaccurate. However, since the data suggests that the number of noncustodial fathers who are involved with children in foster care is significantly larger than the number of maltreating fathers, risk and safety assessment take on critical roles.

Thanks!

The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children

User Manual Series (2006)

Author(s): Rosenberg, Wilcox (2006) Office on Child Abuse and Neglect

Section I

3. Fathers and Their Impact on Child Maltreatment

A father in the home can be a strong protective factor for children. A father also may play a role in child maltreatment. This chapter first looks at the definition and impact of child maltreatment and presents data on the perpetrators of child abuse and neglect. The chapter then discusses fathers in light of their varying roles.

3.1 Child Maltreatment and Its Impact on Children

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) (P.L. 93-247) defines child abuse and neglect as any "recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker that results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation" of a child under the age of 18; or, "an act or failure to act that presents an imminent risk of serious harm" to a child.

Maltreatment is commonly classified into four categories:

- **Physical abuse** includes punching, beating, kicking, biting or shaking a child.
- **Sexual abuse** refers to any sexual contact with a child, the simulation of such conduct with a child, exposing a child to sexually explicit material or conduct.
- **Child neglect** is a failure to provide for a child's basic needs for health care, food, clothing, adult supervision, education, and nurturing.
- **Psychological maltreatment** refers to behavior such as ridiculing, terrorizing, corrupting, or denying affection to a child.

The abuse and neglect of children can have profoundly negative consequences for the social, psychological, and physical health of children. The physical abuse (e.g., shaking a crying baby) and neglect of infants is linked to a range of physical and emotional maladies (e.g., seizures, irritability, developmental delays, and learning disabilities).²⁵ The physical and psychological abuse of preschoolers and school-aged children is associated with depression, low self-esteem, antisocial behavior, juvenile delinquency, and adult criminal behavior.²⁶ Sexual abuse is associated with depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, suicidal behavior, and promiscuity.²⁷ Neglect is associated with "non-organic failure to thrive," which is characterized by below-average weight, height, and intellectual development; neglect also is linked to attachment disorders, aggression, and difficulty dealing with others.²⁸

3.2 Perpetrators of Child Maltreatment

In 2003, an estimated 906,000 children were victims of abuse and neglect. Neglect was the most common form of maltreatment, with 60.9 percent of child victims suffering from neglect in 2003. Neglect was followed by physical abuse (18.9 percent of child victims), sexual abuse (9.9 percent of child victims), and psychological maltreatment (4.9 percent of child victims). In 2003, approximately 1,500 children died because of abuse or neglect.²⁹

The largest percentage of perpetrators (83.9 percent) was parents, including birth parents, adoptive parents, and stepparents.³⁰ How do fathers compare to mothers in the perpetration of child maltreatment? As discussed earlier, Federal data derived from CPS reports in 2003 indicate that in 18.8 percent of the substantiated cases, fathers were the sole perpetrators of maltreatment; in 16.9 percent of the cases, the fathers and the mothers were perpetrators; and in 1.1 percent of the cases, the father acted with someone else to abuse or neglect his child. Mothers were the sole perpetrators in 40.8 percent of the cases and acted with someone besides the father in 6.3 percent of the cases.³¹ This means that fathers were involved in 36.8 percent of child maltreatment cases and that mothers were involved in 64 percent of child maltreatment cases. Additionally, more than one-half of the male perpetrators were biological fathers, and, although recidivism rates were low, biological fathers were more likely to be perpetrators of maltreatment again than were most other male perpetrators. This may be due in part to the lack of permanence between a mother and her boyfriend or that the perpetrator may be excluded from the household before recidivism can occur.³²

Mothers are almost twice as likely to be directly involved in child maltreatment as fathers. Mothers are more likely to abuse or neglect their children than fathers because they bear a larger share of parenting responsibilities in two-parent families and because a large percentage of families today are headed by mothers. In some communities, they are the majority.³³ Perpetrator patterns differ, however, by type of maltreatment. Mothers are not more likely to be the perpetrator when it comes to sexual abuse; fathers are more likely to be reported for this crime.³⁴

3.3 The Presence of Fathers as a Protective Factor

Relatively little research has focused squarely on the question of how fathers either directly contribute to the risk of child abuse in a family or offer a protective factor. Nevertheless, several studies on fathers and parents in general offer insights into the role of fathers in the child maltreatment equation:

- Generally speaking, the same characteristics that make a man a good father make him less likely to abuse or neglect his children. Fathers who nurture and take significant responsibility for basic childcare for their children (e.g., feeding, changing diapers) from an early age are significantly less likely to sexually abuse their children.³⁵ These fathers typically develop such a strong connection with their children that it decreases the likelihood of any maltreatment.
- The involvement of a father in the life of a family is also associated with lower levels of child neglect, even in families that may be facing other factors, such as unemployment and poverty, which could place the family at risk for maltreatment.³⁶ Such involvement reduces the parenting and housework load a mother has to bear and increases the

overall parental investments in family life, thereby minimizing the chances that either parent will neglect to care for or to supervise their children.

- On average, fathers who live in a married household with their children are better able to create a family environment that is more conducive to the safety and necessary care of their children. Consequently, children who live with their biological father in a married household are significantly less likely to be physically abused, sexually abused, or neglected than children who do not live with their married biological parents.

One cannot equate a household headed by a married mother and father with a household headed by parents who are cohabitating. There is something about the legal and social commitments of marriage that strengthens the positive impacts of fathering—it may simply be that being married strengthens the commitment of a father to his family. However, when working with families headed by a cohabitating couple, the caseworker should not dismiss the potential contributions to be made by the father. While research shows the benefits of marriage over cohabitation when it comes to raising children, fathers who live with the mother of their children are still in a position to contribute greatly to their children's development and must be considered a potential asset by the caseworker.³⁷ The caseworker may also want to see if the cohabitating parents are interested in being referred to a marriage preparation course. For more information on such programs, see the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Healthy Marriage Initiative website at <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/healthymarriage/index.html>.

By contrast, children who live in father-absent homes often face higher risks of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect than children who live with their fathers. A 1997 Federal study indicated that the overall rate of child maltreatment among single-parent families was almost double that of the rate among two-parent families: 27.4 children per 1,000 were maltreated in single-parent families, compared to 15.5 per 1,000 in two-parent families.³⁸ One national study found that 7 percent of children who had lived with one parent had ever been sexually abused, compared to 4 percent of children who lived with both biological parents.³⁹

3.4 The Role of Fathers in Child Maltreatment

While a father in the home reduces the likelihood of a child being abused, there are still, of course, fathers who are perpetrators of child abuse. Research shows that there are certain characteristics of fathers that make them more likely to mistreat a child. Poverty, underemployment, or unemployment can increase a father's stress level, which may make him more likely to abuse his children physically.⁴⁰ Underemployment and unemployment also undermine a father's feelings of self-worth, which may make him more likely to lash out at his children.⁴¹

Substance abuse also is strongly associated with higher rates of abuse and neglect among fathers and mothers. One study found that 66 percent of children raised in alcoholic homes were physically maltreated or witnessed domestic violence and that more than 25 percent of these children were sexually abused.⁴² Additionally, fathers who were abused or who witnessed domestic violence between their parents are more likely to abuse their own children.⁴³ Among other things, substance abuse lowers the inhibitions that fathers might otherwise have in connection with abusing their children and by diminishing self-control.

Fathers with a low sense of self-worth are also more likely to abuse their children.⁴⁴ Those experiencing psychological distress or low self-esteem may seek diversion from their problems

or may abuse their children as a way to dominate and thus to derive a perverse sense of personal power.⁴⁵ Fathers also may abuse their children as a way of exacting revenge on a spouse or partner by whom they feel humiliated.⁴⁶

²⁵ Conway, E. E. (1998). Nonaccidental head injury in infants: The shaken baby syndrome revisited. *Pediatric Annals*, 27(10), 677-690; Alexander, R. C. & Smith, W. L. (1998). Shaken baby syndrome. *Infants and Young Children*, 10(3), 1-9; Wallace, H. (1996). *Family violence: Legal, medical, and social perspectives*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon; Goldman, J., & Salus, M. K. (2003). [back](#)

²⁶ Goldman, J., & Salus, M. K. (2003); Buchanan, A. (1996). *Cycles of child maltreatment: Facts, fallacies, and interventions*. Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons; Greenough, W. T., Black, J. E., & Wallace, C. S. (1987). Experience and brain development. *Child Development*, 58, 539-559; Shore, R. (1997). *Rethinking the brain*. New York, NY: Families and Work Institute; Moeller, T. P., Bachman, G. A. & Moeller, J. R. (1993). The combined effects of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse during childhood: Long-term health consequences for women. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 17(5), 623-640. [back](#)

²⁷ Calder, M. C., & Peake, A. (2001). Capacity to parent the abused child and siblings. In M. C. Calder, A. Peake, & K. Rose (Eds.), *Mothers of sexually abused children: A framework for assessment, understanding and support* (pp. 180-220). Dorset, UK: Russell House; Putman, F. W. (2003). Ten-year research update review: Child sexual abuse. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 42(3), 269-278; Wuertele, S. K., & Miller-Perrin, C. L. (1992). *Preventing child sexual abuse*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press. [back](#)

²⁸ Buchanan, A. (1996); Greenough, W. T., et al. (1987); Shore, R. (1997); Moeller, T. P., et al. (1993); Goldman, J., & Salus, M. K. (2003). [back](#)

²⁹ U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (ACYF). (2005). [back](#)

³⁰ U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (ACYF). (2005). [back](#)

³¹ U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (ACYF). (2005). [back](#)

³² Shusterman, G. R. Fluke, J. D. & Yuan, Y. T. (2005). *Male perpetrators of child maltreatment: Findings from NCANDS* [On-line]. Available: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/05/child-maltreat/report.pdf>. [back](#)

³³ Goldman, J., & Salus, M. K. (2003); Straus, M. A., Gelles, R. J., & Steinmetz, S. K. (1980). *Behind closed doors: Violence in the American family*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday. [back](#)

³⁴ Shusterman, G. R., et al. (2005). [back](#)

³⁵ Pruett, K. (2000). [back](#)

³⁶ Gaudin, J. M., & Dubowitz, H. (1997). Family functioning in neglectful families: Recent research. In J. D. Berrick, R. P. Barth, & N. Gilbert (Eds.), *Child welfare research review, Vol. 2* (pp. 28-62). New York, NY: Columbia University Press; Marshall, D. B., English, D. J., & Stewart, A. J. (2001). The effect of fathers or father figures on child behavioral problems in families referred to child protective services. *Child Maltreatment*, 6(4), 290-299. [back](#)

³⁷ Bumpass, L., & Lu, H. (2000). Trends in cohabitation and implications for children's family contexts in the U.S. *Population Studies* 54, 29-41. [back](#)

³⁸ Goldman, J., & Salus, M. K. (2003); Buchanan, A. (1996); Calder, M. C., & Peake, A. (2001). Wuertele, S. K., & Miller-Perrin, C. L. (1992). [back](#)

³⁹ Finkelhor, D., Moore, D., Hamby, S. L., & Strauss, M. A. (1997). Sexually abused children in a national survey of parents: Methodological issues. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 21(1), 1-9. [back](#)

⁴⁰ Buchanan, A. (1996); Goldman, J., & Salus, M. K. (2003); Kruttschnitt, C., McLeod, J. D., & Dornfield, M. (1994). The economic environment of child abuse. *Social Problems*, 41(2), 299-315. [back](#)

⁴¹ Buchanan, A. (1996); Figueredo, A. J., & McCloskey, L. A. (1993). Sex, money, and paternity: The evolutionary psychology of domestic violence. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, 14(6), 353-379. [back](#)

⁴² Buchanan, A. (1996). [back](#)

⁴³ Buchanan, A. (1996). [back](#)

⁴⁴ Figueredo, A. J., & McCloskey, L. A. (1993). [back](#)

⁴⁵ Figueredo, A. J., & McCloskey, L. A. (1993); Buchanan, A. (1996). [back](#)

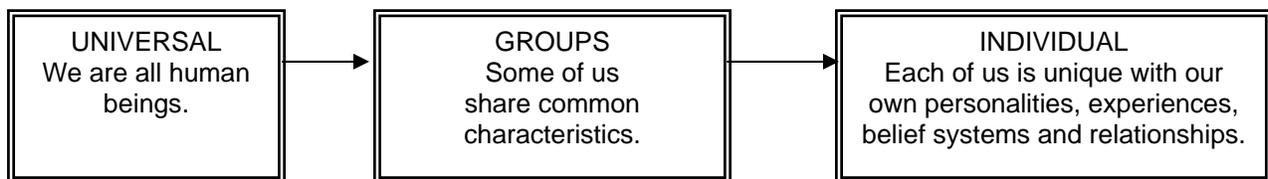
⁴⁶ Figueredo, A. J., & McCloskey, L. A. (1993). [back](#)

What About the Dads? Tools for Dialog

Studies like *What About the Dads?** explore the complexity of work with maltreating fathers when it comes to balancing safety and risk assessment with well-being and connection. While safety is always paramount, the same studies also indicate reluctance on the part of some service providers to search for and locate nonresident fathers and their kin even in instances where doing so may provide significant benefits for children and their families.

Self reflection provides an opportunity for workers to assess the impact of their own attitudes and biases but as important, on-going review of policies, agency practices and community attitudes and resources support best practice when it leads to meaningful engagement with fathers. But unless self-reflection leads to dialog and greater understanding, it is not enough.

The following tool for dialog from the Spaulding Institute reminds us that the purpose of engagement is to understand each individual as unique. While it is true that we all share commonalities as human beings and that some of share common characteristics as members of groups, e.g. females or males, parents, Latinos, Midwesterners, each of us or each family with whom we work is unique with our own personalities, experiences, belief systems and strengths/needs.



If we assume that we know all we need to know about the fathers with whom we work without engaging, without understanding the benefits of father-involvement when safety can be assured or without accurately assessing an absent father's or his family's potential for supporting his children then children may lose important benefits.

Remember that stereotypes are "stopping points" that involve assuming information or without moving forward to the point at which assessments and understanding are based on dialog with fathers and families as unique individuals or units.

STEREOTYPE
A stereotype is employed when assumptions about an individual are made based on his or her inclusion in a group. It is a stopping point rather than a beginning point in understanding the individual.

GENERALIZATION
A generalization is used to understand some of the common characteristics shared by members of a group. It is a starting point toward understanding individuals within a group. Research shows that there are more in-group than between-group differences.

*Malm K., Murray J. and Geen R. *What About the Dads? Child Welfare Agencies' Efforts to Identify, Locate and Involve Nonresident Fathers.* (Washington, D.C.: the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistance Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2006). Retrieved from <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/06/cw-involve-dads/> on August 23, 2007.

Working with Different Fathers in Different Situations

Caseworkers need to adapt their approaches to fit fathers in varying circumstances. There is no single model for fatherhood and no single model for being an involved father.

Married fathers. This is the model most often associated with positive outcomes for children. Child maltreatment may be a sign of a problem in the marriage. At the very least, it signals significant stress upon the marital unit. When working with a family headed by a married mother and father, the caseworker must come to understand the status of the marriage. Is it strong and healthy? Is it troubled and, if so, why and how? The condition of the marriage directly impacts the children. Furthermore, the child maltreatment may have occurred as a result of marital problems that caused misdirected anger, stress, and exhaustion.

Cohabiting parents. A man and a woman living together who have one or more children together present many of the same issues as a married couple. However, the research shows that cohabitation—even and especially when children are involved—is not the same as marriage. For example, one study reveals that when couples marry after cohabiting, they are nearly 50 percent more likely to divorce eventually as compared to couples that did not live together.

Incarcerated fathers. More and more programs are working with men in prison not only to prepare them for returning to a productive role in society, but just as importantly to prepare them for being a good father upon their return. Many men who are in prison have never had an opportunity or know how to be good fathers. These programs work with men around issues related to fatherhood not only out of a commitment to connecting men with their children, but also because ensuring that men who leave prison are prepared to take an active role in their family may be one of the best ways to motivate men to avoid the behaviors that got them into prison in the first place. A caseworker working with a family who has a father currently in prison may find it valuable to determine where the father is incarcerated and if one of these programs is currently operating at this facility.

Multiple fathers. A situation that can be extremely challenging occurs when there are multiple fathers involved in the family. In some families, children are living in the same household, yet have different fathers.

When working with a family with multiple fathers involved, it is important for the caseworker to understand the role each man plays in the family dynamic. It is also important to learn how each father views the maltreatment, what led up to it, and who, in his mind, is responsible for the maltreatment occurring. All men living in the household should be part of the process, including family meetings. Whether and when to involve

other fathers of children in the household needs to be determined on a case-by-case basis and, like any challenging issue facing a caseworker, the input of a supervisor can be a valuable tool. The goal of the entire process, of course, is to achieve safety and permanency for the child. One or all of the fathers who are connected to the family can prove to be a valuable ally in accomplishing this goal—determining which of the fathers and how he or they will be helpful, and how the caseworker can support them in being helpful, is the task the caseworker faces.

Boyfriends. While he is not the father, a boyfriend may fill the role of father to the child. He may contribute financially to rearing the child. He may be the father of other children in the house, but not of the child who was maltreated. If the father of the child who was maltreated is involved in any way, the father assuredly will have strong feelings about the boyfriend. Much has been written about boyfriends in the house and their role in child maltreatment. Because these men typically do not have the same history of care and nurturing with the child, the same emotional and normative commitment to the child's welfare, and the same institutionalized role as a father figure as do biological fathers in intact families, boyfriends pose a higher risk to children if they spend time alone with them.

These factors help to explain why mothers' boyfriends are much more likely to be involved in physical or sexual abuse of children than a biological father. In one study of physical abuse, boyfriends accounted for 64 percent of non-parental abuse, even though boyfriends performed only 2 percent of non-parental care. Another study found that the odds of child maltreatment were 2.5 times higher in households with a boyfriend living in the home, compared to households with a biological father. The authors of this study concluded that CPS caseworkers should "focus more of their attention on the high-risk relationship between a surrogate father and the children."

Stepfathers. While research varies, some studies show that stepfathers are more likely to abuse their children physically and sexually. A 1997 study of more than 600 families in upstate New York found that children living with stepfathers were more than three times more likely to be sexually abused than children living in intact families. Another study found that the presence of a stepfather doubles the risk of sexual abuse for girls—either from the stepfather or another male figure. Analyzing reports of fatal child abuse in the United States, one study found that stepfathers were approximately 60 times more likely than biological fathers to kill their preschool children. While these studies find that stepfathers often invest less in caring for their stepchildren, others cite many examples of caring behaviors by and close relationships with stepparents, suggesting that paternal investment is not restricted only to biological offspring.

FACTORS THAT INHIBIT or PROMOTE INVOLVEMENT OF FATHERS WITH CHILDREN

(From Levine & Pitt, *New Expectations: Community Strategies For Responsible Fatherhood*, p.119-120)

Factors that inhibit the involvement of non-custodial fathers with their children:

❏ **The Shame of Unemployment:** Fathers often subscribe to the stereotype that defines them as “bread-winners”. Studies show that “when low-income, non-custodial fathers do not have jobs and cannot provide financially, they withdraw from other forms of involvement with their children because they are ashamed of themselves.”

❏ **Poor Communication with Mothers:** The quality of communication between fathers and mothers is a “key determinant of fathers’ involvement.” Good communication means more frequent contact with children and higher payment of child support.

❏ **Feelings of Incompetence:** If fathers, married or unmarried, do not feel confident and competent in their roles as fathers, they tend to be less involved.

❏ **If a man is connected to his child, he will find a job – any job.** It is not jobs that lead men to children, but children who lead men to jobs.

Charles Ballard
Founder & Director of Institute for
Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization

Low male earnings not only reduce the likelihood of marriage, they increase the likelihood of divorce. Married couples where men are not working are about twice as likely to experience a separation and/or divorce as families where men are employed. While separation or divorce do not preclude men from maintaining an ongoing connection with their children, joblessness is often so shameful for men that it leads them to withdraw from their children or to act harshly and lead the children to reject them.

An annual poll of social attitudes has found “being a good provider” to be the leading definition of masculinity. (p.39)

The Yankelovich
Monitor Survey

Over the last 30 years, the American economy has undergone a profound change from a manufacturing economy in which uneducated men could sell their physical strength and earn a good living to an information economy in which employment at anything more than minimum wage increasingly requires literacy, numeracy and the ability to interpret data. (p.37-39)

Levine & Pitt
*New Expectations: Community Strategies
For Responsible Fatherhood*

RELATIONSHIP OR EMPLOYMENT

Concerns about the affects of unemployment have been confirmed over the last 30 years by sociologist William Julius Wilson, among others. According to an Annie E. Casey Foundation report in 1995, the pool of marriageable men has shrunk, especially among minority populations: “The percentage of young men ages 25 to 34 who earned enough to lift a four-person family out of poverty has steadily declined since the 1960s (from about 83% to 67%). In 1993, nearly half of all African-American and Latino males ages 25 to 34 did not earn enough to lift a family of four out of poverty. The Casey report, using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, shows a clear and dramatic correlation since the late 1960s between the increase in the number of children raised in mother-only families and the increase in the number of men with earnings below the poverty level. (p. 36)

Levine & Pitt
*New Expectations: Community Strategies
For Responsible Fatherhood*