

**SHARED COMMITMENT:  
ISSUES FROM THE INAUGURAL MEETING OF  
THE NATIONAL PRACTITIONERS NETWORK**

August 1995

**National Center on  
Fathers and Families**

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National Center on Fathers and Families

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# **PREFACE**

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Not since the 1960's and 1970's—when research in the field was at a peak—have family issues captured as much attention or sparked as much wide-scale debate as they have in recent years. Casting its net to address a variety of problems that fall outside the typical domains of psychology and sociology (where much of the early work was located), research on families is part of a growing interdisciplinary focus which is no longer simply implicated in questions about family development. Rather, the present interdisciplinary focus of the field attempts to respond to massive changes in the needs, structures, poverty levels, and formation patterns of families and the policies that are designed to remedy the increasingly complex problems they face.

A significant and compelling part of research on families over the past 20 years explores the impact of father involvement and father absence on children's development and complements much of the existing research on issues in other areas—e.g., female-headed households, poverty, social welfare, and public policy. In particular, the potential impact of family support legislation, national welfare reform agendas, and persistent systemic problems at local and state levels lend a sense of urgency to the research discussion about father participation in families. What is noticeably lacking in these discussions, however, is a focus on programs that serve fathers and families and the voices of practitioners.

The issues defining and surrounding research and practice on fathers and families are complex. Nested in each issue are multiple layers of questions about the problems facing young fathers, mothers, and families; the needs of programs and the practitioners who work in them; changes in national, state, and local policies; and the nature of the tasks facing society. Although there is substantial discussion about the impact of father absence, research studies provide only modest evidence for the negative consequences of father absence on children and typically attribute these negative effects to reduced family income resulting from separation or divorce. There are only sparse data on families that deviate from “traditional, intact” family forms such as families headed by adolescent or young, adult never-married, and/or poor mothers. Research on families of color, outside of poverty studies, are conspicuously absent from the knowledge base.

The work of the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) uses the strengths and voids in these research discussions as a launching pad to develop a framework for research, practice, and policy—to promote the building of a field in which the needs of children and families are the core of the discourse and research and practice cohere to craft the language and activities associated with that discourse. NCOFF aims to bring together these issues within a research and collaborative effort on behalf of children and their families.

Established in July 1994 with core funding from The Annie E. Casey Foundation, NCOFF's mission is to improve the life chances of children and the efficacy of families by facilitating the effective involvement of fathers. Developed in the spirit of the Philadelphia Children's Network's (PCN) motto, "Help the children. Fix the system.", NCOFF seeks to increase and enrich the possibilities for children, ensuring that they are helped and that the system allows for and encourages the participation of fathers in their children's lives. NCOFF shares with PCN and other field activities the premises that children need loving, nurturing families; that mothers and families in general need to be supported in providing nurturance; and that family support efforts should increase the ability of both parents and adults within and outside the biological family to contribute to children's development and well-being.

NCOFF's mission is developed around **Seven Core Learnings**, distilled from the experiences of PCN and confirmed thus far in our work as being consistent with the experiences of other programs and agencies serving fathers. These Core Learnings are:

1. Fathers care—even if that caring is not always shown in conventional ways;
2. Father presence matters—in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development;
3. Joblessness is a major impediment to family formation and father involvement;
4. Existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment operate to create obstacles and disincentives to father involvement. The disincentives are sufficiently compelling as to have prompted the emergence of a phenomenon dubbed "underground fathers"—men who acknowledge paternity and are involved in the lives of their children but who refuse to participate as fathers in the formal systems;
5. A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the vital skills to share the responsibility for parenting;
6. The transition from biological father to committed parent has significant developmental implications for young fathers; and
7. The behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices within families of origin.

The Core Learnings provide the context for NCOFF's basic research which is designed to synthesize work from multiple disciplines, provide current analyses, and examine emerging conceptualizations in the field. NCOFF recognizes that the scope of need in the field requires a variety of approaches and the commitment and collective effort of different communities. The NCOFF research agenda is intended to support the field in the development, conduct, and advancement of research, practice, and responsive policies.

This Monograph is intended to highlight critical and emerging topics in the field that have received minimal attention and that complement issues identified in the NCOFF Research Databases and the critical literature reviews. The Databases combine citation lists, annotated bibliographies, and abstracts of research articles, reports, and volumes that focus on issues implied in the Core Learnings. The critical literature reviews have been written and reviewed by scholars representing multiple disciplines and research interests in fathers and families. Information about the NCOFF Databases, the literature reviews and analysis, working papers, and other NCOFF documents and activities is currently available on HandsNet.

Embedded in NCOFF's mission is a vision in which fathers, families, and communities are positioned to ensure the well-being of children and are able to translate their hope and the possibilities that accompany that hope into human and social prosperity. A well-coordinated national effort on fathers and families will give support and a collective voice to programs, encourage research, and contribute to responsive policy formulation. Such a vehicle would provide the appropriate context for experience-sharing among researchers, practitioners, and policymakers; identification of basic research, program, and policy-related issues; surfacing of new research issues; and increased opportunities for communication, cooperation, and collaboration.

*Vivian L. Gadsden*  
*Co-Director*

In 1991, the National Commission on Children reported that more than one-half of all White children and three-quarters of all Black children born in the 1970s and 1980s are likely to live some portion of their formative years with only their mothers. These statistics alone cause reason for alarm. However, when they are coupled with the poverty statistics for many of these children and images from frontline practitioners and when names and faces are attached to the statistics, the urgency of responding to the crises facing large numbers of families is apparent.

Since the 1960s, considerable attention has focused on families, particularly those living in poverty. Despite a growing body of research and changes in social policies, the plight of these families, overwhelmingly comprised of young and African American and Latino populations, has changed little. Where such change has occurred, it is often short-term and rarely responds to the chronic and intergenerational problems within many families. Policy discussions focus on family support legislation, national welfare reform agendas, and persistent systemic problems at local and state levels while the needs of poor families and the issues of father participation slowly gain visibility and prominence.

Since the 1970s, there have been ebbs and flows in the attention to and support of programs that assist low-income parents and children. These programs often vary in the types of activities they provide but typically have cross-cutting goals and missions involving support of families, irrespective of the programs' primary focus, e.g., parenting, drug rehabilitation, or educational assistance. Over the past few years, many of these programs have expanded their work as they recognize increasingly the vastly changing needs of the young families that seek assistance. In addition, private foundations have supported many programs to explore innovative approaches that help families increase their work with specific populations, such as nonresident, noncustodial, low-income fathers.

Despite popular perception to the contrary, there are not substantially more programs that focus on mothers than fathers. However, programs that serve families, particularly poor families, typically involve mothers, in large part because they are and have been historically the primary caregivers of children. Countless programs have been implemented within recent years that attempt to address the wide range of father-related issues and that support fathers in initiating contact with their children, re-engaging them, or helping them to sustain their involvement.

The practitioners who develop programs to help poor, young men, women, and families chart their life-course can be found in small communities and large cities throughout the United States. The practitioners are not only professionally poised but are also deeply vested to improve the life chances of children and families. Irrespective of their histories and the populations that they serve, they share a commitment. The inaugural meeting of the National Practitioners Network aimed to capture the ways in which that commitment has unfolded over the past few years, affects the operation of programs, guides efforts on behalf of children and families, and influences the development of young men into fathers and their engagement in their children's lives. While practitioners represent powerful forces in the lives of the fathers and their families and often are involved actively in local and state efforts, their voices are sometimes drowned by the clamoring within national discourses or ignored in the formulation of policies and national agendas.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE PRACTITIONERS ROUNDTABLE**

**D**uring the spring of 1994, Ralph Smith, currently Director of Development at the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Founding Executive Director of the Philadelphia Children's Network and the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF), was asked by the Office of the Vice President of the United States to join a Planning Group for a conference on family policy to be hosted by Vice President Albert and Tipper Gore. This was to be the third such conference hosted by the Vice President and Mrs. Gore. Entitled "Family Re-Union III: The Role of Men in Their Children's Lives," the Conference was planned as a day-long series of meetings with a focus on family policy issues addressing fathers' engagement with their children.

Based on his longstanding, personal and professional efforts on behalf of children, Smith understood better than most the wide range of needs of the increasing numbers of vulnerable children in urban communities, particularly Philadelphia communities. PCN's Responsive Fathers Program (RFP), one of the six projects in the Public/Private Ventures Demonstration Project, had provided ample illustrations of the scope and severity of the problems facing these children and their fathers and the critical role of the fathers and other men in children's lives. To be certain that these and similarly significant issues were brought to the Conference table, Smith suggested and initiated the work for a set of pre- and post-Conference meetings that would bring together a national collective of practitioners.

From our work with RFP and many other efforts in the field, NCOFF and PCN staff were well aware of the wide-scale needs of different segments of parents, those who were typically low-income, living outside the physical confines of their children's homes, and absent from the daily experiences of their children. What was almost equally striking, however, were the professional and personal contributions of the practitioners, the special talents that they brought to the lives of their programs and the participants, their ability to negotiate the courts and other systems on behalf of families, and their willingness to help young families—many with few resources—navigate the sometimes treacherous course toward self-sufficiency and self-efficacy. What was compelling was the relatively limited opportunities for these practitioners to meet, contribute to discussions in the field, and establish a presence in emerging debates about families.

In July 1994, with support from The Danforth and Annie E. Casey Foundations, PCN and NCOFF brought together 30 frontline practitioners and administrators in programs serving low-skilled fathers and young mothers and families to help shape the presentation of the issues at the Conference, construct a continuing agenda, and establish a national network of actively engaged program staff. The larger purposes were to respond to the apparent and pressing needs of families and practitioners by initiating a discussion among practitioners and advocates that would lead to improvements of local and state efforts and enable practitioners to assume a central role in the national debate. Thus, NCOFF and PCN aimed to contribute to the creation of a viable entity that would have the capacity to provide mutual support among practitioners and that also would promote meaningful and mutually respectful discussions among practitioners, researchers, and policymakers.

This Roundtable was a particularly propitious moment for practitioners and NCOFF staff to meet and to participate in the national conference led by the Vice President. The meeting provided opportunities for practitioners to engage in discussions with other practitioners, national policymakers, and the Vice President, with whom the practitioners met for a special

Pre-Conference open forum for selected Conference participants. For NCOFF, the meeting provided a rare opportunity to learn about programs from frontline practitioners, introduce NCOFF to them, and begin to realize the possibilities for shared commitment between the Center and this field of programs.

Since the July 1994 meeting, the Practitioners Network, with funding from The Danforth and Ford Foundations, has been formally implemented and is located at the Families and Work Institute under the leadership of Ed Pitt. Its purpose is to give providers an opportunity to meet; identify critical issues; deliberate the nature and scope of the problems; explore strategies and alternatives to existing practice; exchange ideas, approaches, and stories about emerging policies and successful models; and participate in the national discussions on fathers. In addition, the Father Policy Institute in Chicago has been created as a field-issues, practitioner-focused organization under the leadership of Kirk Harris and David Pate. Its purpose is to examine critical policy issues, particularly at local and state levels, that affect programs and the fathers and families they serve and to engage practitioners in policy discussions.

The Family Re-Union III Conference itself reflected, in large part, Vice President Gore's abiding commitment to "re-inventing family policy." This commitment led him as a matter of course to seek the counsel of a nationwide network of family service providers, agency and program directors, and policy analysts. Prior to 1994, he had moderated two such sessions and sought another opportunity for a similar conference on an issue of personal importance to him (and increasing importance to his own sense of the formulation of policy alternatives): fostering strong, durable relationships between fathers and their children. The conference was co-sponsored by the Tennessee Department of Health Services and the Children, Youth, and Families Consortium at the University of Minnesota. Vice President Gore announced the national research initiative led by NCOFF, the Kennedy School of Government and School of Public Health at Harvard University, and the University of Minnesota's Consortium on Children, Youth, and Families.

This paper presents issues and questions from the practitioners who attended the Roundtable and the Conference. In creating this paper, NCOFF aims to provide a coherent collection of ideas, issues, needs, hopes, and possibilities as envisioned and described by the practitioners. Although the array of programs throughout the country has expanded, there is limited exploration of practice itself or program efforts for father-focused, mother-specific, and co-parenting programs. As recent reports about the Young Unwed Fathers and the Parents Fair Share Projects suggest, programs and the participants in them provide insights into the personal and systemic barriers to fathers' involvement. These programs are invaluable sources of information about the nature of practice, the inherent problems in serving diverse populations of parents and children, approaches to effecting change in the lives of low-income resident and non-resident fathers, the ways in which policies support or work against fathers' engagement, and the needs of families that Ronald Mincy (Ford Foundation) describes as *fragile families*, i.e., young mothers and fathers with few educational, social, and economic resources.

A disturbingly high and increasing number of children are growing up in fragile families and in other families experiencing hardship and often are without the supports necessary for optimal healthy development. These children are thought to be especially at risk for becoming poor academic achievers, incarcerated and violent youths; victims of violence; and un-

married adolescent parents. As Ed Pitt notes, “How to go about correcting this condition—i.e., increasing the life chances and success of these children and their families—is possibly the most challenging public social policy issue facing society in the coming years.”

## **ISSUES AND IMAGES FROM THE FIELD**

### **Serving Children, Supporting Parents**

*If we want stronger children, we must commit ourselves to the need for present and stronger parents.*

Essential to NCOFF’s mission of improving the lives of children is the task of improving conditions in which mothers and fathers nurture their children. Assumptions about who should do the nurturing in the family can prevent any nurturing from taking place at all and is counter-productive for service agencies and other organizations interested in promoting family welfare. For instance, many service agencies that are focused on families often exclude fathers in program planning. Among the Roundtable participants there was the perception that “fathers do care. . . and that the [caring] is universal. . . but [that] we need to find ways to encourage [and allow] that natural caring [to develop].” Despite this common perception, the participants also recognized, as one commented, “Parent involvement means ‘mother’ . . . ; the assumption is that fathers are either unavailable or uninterested.”

While activities in many family and children’s programs appear to exclude fathers, others in fact welcome fathers’ involvement. However, they may have had considerably less success in engaging fathers than mothers or the mother’s family of origin. Reports from several projects indicate that when effective recruiting practices are instituted, fathers participate actively in the programs. Examples are to be found in the work of James Levine and Ed Pitt with Head Start, Joe Jones with Baltimore Healthy Start, Sheila Tucker with the St. Bernadine Head Start, and Thomas Henry and Greg Patton with PCN’s co-parenting program, among others. However, relationships between young mothers and fathers are sometimes tension-filled and strained, and many programs do not have the time, staff skills, or support to connect young men who have distanced themselves from the child’s mother and are unemployed or experiencing hardship over long periods of time.

As programs attempt to work together to ensure the healthy development of children and families, they may find collaborations initially difficult, perhaps filled with minor tensions and differences of opinion that cause programs to veer away from their original missions. As we noted earlier, despite their common purposes to support the child, existing programs typically serve mothers. With shrinking resources and the inherent complexity of collaborations, some programs may find averting the problems easier than exploring alternatives.

Supporting fathers’ involvement in the family is in no way meant to undermine or trivialize the mother’s role in nurturing and is not based on any assumptions that “being pro-father is being anti-mother.” Children need communities of vested adults and both parents to contribute to their development and provide them with psychological, emotional, and social resources and the opportunity to thrive. Strong, healthy children rely on the well-being of their caregivers, and to that end, the needs of mothers, fathers, and others who are involved in raising children must be addressed individually. In that same spirit, the programs and re-

search directed at fatherhood must be broad enough to encompass father-substitutes and all other role models who fulfill this critical role for children. Too often their contributions go unnoticed. One practitioner noted: "I've seen [men] caring for babies, and I've seen them be involved with their children's lives. . . . And they keep saying that we have a fatherless society, but the men father those children and they're there." Similarly, the contributions made by fathers are often invisible to the increasingly critical public. One practitioner summed up the group's discussion on fathers and their families by commenting that, "I think that what we are generally saying is that fathers care, but. . . their caring is not recognized."

Practitioners, researchers, and policymakers might work collectively to assist fathers in expressing their caring without fear of aspersions or intimidation by a culture that does not always reward their verbal and enacted expressions of caring. Practitioners, researchers, and policymakers also can contribute to children's emotional well-being and sense of belonging and to a reconstruction of the culture of fathering. While fathers are important, "our approaches to the issues of fatherhood [also] must be sufficiently flexible to include father-substitutes, father-surrogates, mentors, and others who fill this critical role in the lives of many children."

### **The Needs of Young Fathers in the Transition to Committed Parenthood**

A fundamental premise of NCOFF's research and programming is described in the introductory quotation in the section, "Children and Their Fathers": The needs of parents must be met in order for the well-being of children to be promoted. Practitioners and researchers alike need to position themselves to learn about the experiences and circumstances of the parents we serve and how they understand and interpret their situations. That is, what are the beliefs and practices upon which young fathers construct their lives? How do they assess their own life possibilities and life options? The general consensus of the practitioners was that "we can gain that understanding best by listening to these young men and women, i.e., that "above all else, . . . we should listen carefully to the voices of the young parents. . . . Young fathers tend to be their own best spokespersons." When practitioners assume the role of listeners, they develop the physical space into places for learning, unlearning, and relearning for themselves, fathers, and others connected to their efforts.

The experiences of many young fathers is complicated by the fact that they have been raised in the absence of fathers. One practitioner pointed out, "I'm not all that sure if all our young men really understand what their role in this whole scheme of things is. So [it] might be helpful to. . . see how they see their role." The very question of what it means to be a father is particularly intimidating to young men who have had few or no role models of fathering at all and who may rely on television images to understand the responsibilities of an involved father. Many fall prey to harsh and criminal representations of manhood and maleness in written and electronic media and stereotypical images of gender roles. This is particularly critical for young African American fathers and other fathers of color who have few television images of boys who are successful in school or men who are caring fathers.

As a result of listening, practitioners reportedly learned that the young men consider their prospects as fathers to be bleak. High rates of unemployment and structural problems within the welfare system discourage them. The practitioners criticized the welfare system for demanding high payments from fathers who were unable to pay and cited the frustration of these fathers when they saw that only \$50 of their contribution directly supported their chil-

dren. One practitioner described the situation by noting that “there [i]s considerable frustration. . . [the fathers] felt that they were not supporting the child, but supporting the system.” Other sources of discouragement cited for young fathers included the media, which, Tom Henry argued, “paints a picture of these young men as gun-toting, drug-dealing, young fathers.” Another practitioner echoed the thoughts of the group: “We see the media as being one of our biggest things to deal with.” The negative images not only affect public perception which shapes family policy but also influence how these young men and the mothers of their children feel about their competence as fathers. The societal message that on one hand declares young men, particularly unwed African American men, to be incompetent, negligent fathers on the other hand ignores the contributions they make and sets up a cycle in which men are doomed to fail as fathers.

Often the practitioners look to the role of women in the lives of the young fathers to explain the fathers’ failure or inability to be with their children. The relationship that a young father has with the mother of his child the maternal grandmother of his child, or his own mother can influence how involved he is with his child. For instance, the young mother and her family of origin may resent the father’s involvement with the child. One speaker described how, “most of the maternal grandparents. . . were keeping the [father] out of the situation.” Other practitioners attributed problems to the nature and quality of mother-son relationships, describing how certain mother-son relationships discourage the son from taking responsibility for his life. One practitioner explained, “There is a tape we use in our parenting skills in our fatherhood program [that] talks about how mothers raise their daughters and love their sons. I think there is some truth to that. . . If there is no father in the home, the boy stays as long as he wants to and the mother always says to him when he comes back, ‘Well, here’s your room just like you left it.’ She forgets that this young man is supposed to be somebody’s husband at some point and time.”

Perhaps one of the most critical issues for the fathers is their distrust of social systems: “Skepticism and cynicism are common, and understandable, reactions to the multiple let-downs which continue to be part of these young men’s lives. It takes courage—and encouragement—to hope.” The young men, prior to becoming fathers, have been ignored often by schools and other systems designed to assist them in developing the skills and competencies for higher education and the world of work. With little knowledge about where to seek help and few resources to assist them, they often do not ask the right questions when confronted with new situations, become impatient in their interactions with system bureaucrats, feel belittled by the system, and eventually disengage from the processes of achieving self-sufficiency or contributing to the efficacy of their children or families. One practitioner commented that a “fundamental challenge in working with young fathers is to show them that they are valued and valuable.” Their contributions to their children are sometimes minimal, infrequent, and inconsistent, and many have low literacy or job skills and little experience finding or holding full-time employment that would enable them to make regular financial contributions.

We well might agree with the practitioner who noted that “our society has never supported the nurturing role of men.” If this is the case, one response might be to help young fathers explore the range of social practices that they consider inhibitory or oppressive and those that might be labeled appropriately as racist or discriminatory. However, “as we acknowledge systems and the systemic nature of problems, we must not lose sight of individual responsibility” that many of the young fathers do not assume, or the sense of one practitioner that, “many fathers still want to be boys and are not yet prepared to be men.” If

this is the case, we might then ask them to map against their own expectations, initiatives, sense of responsibility, and feelings of self-worth. The most telling comment that implies a broadening of policy perspectives suggests that “as we acknowledge that there are issues of individual responsibility, we must not forget that there are powerful systems and systemic issues deserving our attention.”

## **PROGRAMS AND POLICIES**

*There is no quick fix, no magic bullet, no cookie-cutter program.*

Although the practitioners’ shared common analyses of many issues, their responses were highly variable in terms of the specific problems that they and the fathers in their programs face. They commented on the different assumptions with which each practitioner begins his or her work with fathers and the multiple approaches necessary to assist the young men. The practitioners agreed that each must learn from the other so that the issues are defined accurately and addressed effectively. This reciprocal teaching and learning should occur across the communities of practice, research, and policy.

One approach that was identified consistently as effective in programs is coaching. “Coaching,” one practitioner suggested, “is needed to help with unlearning and relearning.” Commentaries from practitioners point to the need of program staff to model the behaviors they wish to see in the young men in their programs.” “Not only is coaching a powerful teaching approach,” as one practitioner argued, “it is also an especially appropriate style with which to address the range and complexity of issues and situations faced by the young fathers in programs.”

The problem that many agreed was the most pervasive and intractable among some young fathers is the notion that “it is ‘uncool’ to acknowledge paternity or pay child support.” Programs must be “prepared to challenge this apparently growing sentiment,” while ensuring that the programs “respond flexibly to [the particular] needs and situations [of the fathers].” In addition, “programs must be prepared to acknowledge and deal with issues and perceptions of sexuality,” notes one practitioner, “as we begin to take men seriously as caregivers.” These are both issues for a small subset of programs and problems for local and state child-serving systems in general, “virtually none of [which] can respond to fathers who are unemployed or who are involved in the ‘informal’ or ‘underground’ economy.”

The multilayered hierarchy of child support systems is a source of problems for practitioners also who find that the systems are “designed to serve others besides the children or fathers.” Programs and the fathers they serve, if they choose to assume this responsibility, must confront “prevailing assumption[s] that are a part of the operation of many existing systems...that fathers are either unavailable or uninterested in their children.” Alternatives to current practices around paternity establishment were described in relationship to programs. For example, one participant noted that “[establishing paternity in hospitals] provides the opportunity for the public sector not only to identify fathers for the purpose of child support but [also] to insert itself between the pregnancy and the birth and begin to support that couple in figuring out what they are going to do.”

The current welfare reform debate is well formed but not always well informed by programs. The implications for state policies and ramifications for poor families are potentially far-reaching. Practitioners will need to be in the forefront of the effort and participate in national forums and Congressional hearings regularly. As one participant stated, "You have got. . . to testify. You have got to let these people know what you are learning." David Pate of the Father Policy Institute reminds us that government has demonstrated little interest in or concern for fathers, "that the Family Support Act of 1988, for example, while helping to provide much-needed income to families and support to mothers, largely has neglected poor men." In addition, "the federal neglect of and hostility toward many young fathers, particularly low-income, fathers of color, has been especially critical, as responsibility for this population is left to the states." These comments suggest that practitioners' roles include advocacy and that what the "field needs is sophisticated advocacy, sometimes discussed as research, but it really needs sophisticated advocacy. That means that someone from among the service providers [must] step up."

## **TOWARD CRAFTING AN AGENDA: NEXT STEPS**

At the end of the two-day meeting, what was obvious in the formal discussions and informal conversations was the shared commitment to families by the practitioners, researchers, and funders attending the meeting and that "the story of fathers was yet to be told." Roundtable participants identified several steps to set in motion the ideas discussed during the Conference and Roundtable. To explore more in depth the broad range of issues discussed, five subcommittees were formed. These sub-committees will focus their attention on: program development, practice, policy issues, continued research on fathers and co-parenting, issues involving the media, and, with the last group, matters of organization, mission, and funding. Finally, NCOFF was designated the research source for the group, assisting in a range of applied research and evaluative activities. Perhaps, however, one of the greatest contributions will be the establishment of stronger relationships between practitioners and researchers conducting work in the field.

## **NATIONAL PRACTITIONERS NETWORK:**

### *THE INITIAL GROUP*

#### **The Baltimore City Healthy Start Program**

#### **Baltimore, Maryland**

*Roundtable Participant: Joseph Jones*

**Baltimore City Healthy Start** is an Infant Mortality Program that provides a host of support services for high risk pregnant women and their children in the Sandtown-Winchester and Harlem Park communities. A pilot project entitled Men's Services was implemented in 1993. This component provides support services to inner city fathers and significant other male support persons who are responsible for the physical, social, and emotional development of the babies born to the female clients. Sixty men were served during the pilot year and program expansion is planned at the current site and in an additional community called Middle

East. The goal of the Men's Services program is to assist fathers and other male support persons with maintaining involvement with their children and families. Objectives include encouraging the men to attend prenatal appointments; pediatric appointments; curriculum sessions involving such issues as male parenting skills, self-esteem and communication skills; and therapeutic support group sessions. The program offers case management services, life planning skills, education assistance, employment assistance, specially designed cultural activities and crisis intervention.

### **The Early Childhood Family Education Program**

**Center for Child and Family Studies**

**St. Cloud State University**

**St. Cloud, Minnesota**

*Roundtable Participant: Glen Palm*

**The Center for Child and Family Studies** is a teacher training institution that prepares people for a license in early childhood and parent education. The Super Saturday component is part of the **Early Childhood Family Education Programs**. These are state funded parent education programs offered by 95% of the Minnesota Public School Districts. The Super Saturday program targets primarily White, middle-class fathers, some single fathers, court-referred fathers, and fathers of children with disabilities. It serves 40-60 families a year, having worked with 400-500 men and their children over the ten year period since its inception. The primary service is parent education and support for fathers including a parent-child activity component. These sessions are offered two Saturdays each month from October through May. Goals of the sessions are (1) to provide safe, fun activities for dads and kids to do together; (2) to allow fathers of young children to meet and talk informally with other men about the joys and challenges of being a father today; (3) to involve fathers in different types of activities and stimulate ideas for activities to do at home; and (4) to provide fathers with information about child behavior and development during the preschool years.

### **The DADS Teen Father Program**

**Lemon Grove, California**

*Roundtable Participant: Dadisi Ron Elliot*

The **DADS (Developing Adolescent Dads for Success) Teen Father Program** targets low income, teenage fathers between the ages of 14 and 21 who have children whose mothers receive public assistance. Twenty-nine youths recently completed the program and thirty-one more will be enrolled for this upcoming year. Weekly workshops on campuses reaches out to 200 additional youths. The purpose of the program is (1) to provide career exploration and job training which will improve future earning potential and better prepare young fathers to share in the financial responsibility of their children; (2) to make these young men aware of the disadvantages of future unplanned pregnancies; and (3) to encourage young fathers to become more responsible for the well-being of their children. In addition to preparing these young men for the world-of-work, the program provides parenting education, health care information and referrals, basic finance and budgeting skills, and self-esteem building exercises. The success of DADS is due in part to the collaborative efforts of the County of San Diego Department of Social Services, the San Diego Consortium and Private Industry Council and the San Diego Unified School District.

**The Fairfax-San Anselmo Children's Center**  
**Fairfax, CA**

*Roundtable Participant: Stanley Seiderman*

This program provides training, consultation, and technical assistance to six child-serving agencies to help them develop the capacity for involving men in their programs. It also has established a Bay Area Network of Involved Men to address social policy and legislative issues affecting men. A third element of its work is the creation of a newsletter to disseminate information about activities, social issues and legislation, and to highlight individual agencies and their efforts to create a more comfortable environment for men. The six agencies serve approximately 400 families. In the next two years twelve more agencies will be added bringing the total number of families served to around 1,200. The goals of this work with the agencies are (1) to reduce or eliminate barriers to male involvement; (2) to increase the men's level of comfort; (3) to increase male involvement in the program; (4) to increase the number of men on staffs and boards; (5) to increase the pool of resources of agencies with successful male involvement programs; and (6) to create a power base to deal with social policy and legislative issues affecting men in the lives of children.

**The Fatherhood Project**  
**Families and Work Institute**  
**New York, New York**

*Roundtable Participants: James Levine and Ed Pitt*

The **Fatherhood Project** is a national program of applied program and policy research that is identifying, developing, and testing ways to effectively support men's involvement in childrearing. Current initiatives include: (1) *The Male Involvement Project*, a national training initiative that channels the expertise of Head Start and other community-based early childhood programs that have already been successful at increasing male involvement to others who share the same goal; (2) *Men and Children*, a state-of-the-art assessment of domestic policies and programs for encouraging the involvement of men in children's lives. The result will be a "road map" with recommendations for those developing policies and programs in the public, private, and philanthropic sectors; (3) *Fathers and Work*, an examination of how workplace policies and culture can support men's involvement in family life, along with a practical seminar on change for corporations and other organizations. The Fatherhood Project's latest publication, designed for use by practitioners, is *Getting Men Involved: Strategies for Early Childhood Programs*.

**The Father Resource Program**  
**Wishard Memorial Hospital**  
**Indianapolis, Indiana**

*Roundtable Participants: Wallace McLaughlin and Sarah Meadows*

The **Father Resource Program** is an initiative designed to improve the life options of expectant or parenting fathers, who are unemployed, underemployed, and undereducated. The program specifically targets African-American men between the ages of 18 and 25. Since program implementation in February 1994, approximately fifty men and their families have

been served. The program is based on a model that recognizes when a young parent is provided with strong social support, adequate resources, and employment options, the young parent will be able to achieve that which they most want to be: A caring, involved, and good parent. The program is designed to help young fathers meet this aspiration, while ensuring that their children also have a promising future. Young fathers who volunteer to participate in the program receive training and support in a variety of areas including: job placement, fatherhood / manhood development education, job readiness skills training, peer group support, legal assistance, and GED instruction on site.

**The Fathers' Resource Center**  
**Minneapolis, Minnesota**

*Roundtable Participant: Neil Tift*

The **Fathers' Resource Center's** mission is to provide men with the inner resources to be the kind of father their children need. The hope is that when fathers are given the assistance to become more capable and involved parents, all of society will benefit. An additional objective of the Fathers' Resource Center is to positively encourage existing service delivery systems to be more inclusive of fathers. The Center serves single, married, and divorced fathers at five sites in Minneapolis. The Center works with an average of 750 fathers on site each year, having served a little over 1,620 fathers in its three year existence. The Fathers' Resource Center provides fathers' support groups, parenting classes, family law clinics, father and child activities, information and referral, educational workshops, and a speakers bureau.

**The Parenting Opportunities Program (POP)**  
**Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission (FCEOC)**  
**Fresno, California**

*Roundtable Participant: Peggy Stovall*

The **Parenting Opportunities Program (POP)** was initially part of a national demonstration project which was conducted by Public Private Ventures as a joint venture with the Fresno Private Industry Council and the Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission (FCEOC). The goal of this project was to provide a full range of services to young unwed fathers between the ages of 16 and 25 to see if this type of intervention would have a positive affect on their ability to become economically self-sufficient and to become better parents to their children. As part of the FCEOC Employment and Training Division, POP was able to take advantage of a pre-existing JTPA delivery system. During the initial eighteen month phase of the project POP enrolled fifty young fathers, and during the one year extension period an additional forty-eight fathers were enrolled. The program helps the fathers obtain their GED and/or high school diploma, receive vocational training, become fully employed, and enhances their parenting and relationship skills. POP seeks to fulfill the overall mission of FCEOC which is to provide services that will enhance the quality of health, education, and economic well-being of the disadvantaged—services which focus on developing self-sufficiency skills in the low-income and disenfranchised population.

## **The Futures Connection Program**

### **Kansas City, Missouri**

*Roundtable Participant: Tom Jakopchek*

**Futures Connection** began as the Parents' Fair Share Demonstration project in Kansas City but is no longer affiliated with PFS. Futures Connection recruits volunteers who want jobs so they can pay child support. Three hundred thirty-four people have volunteered for the program and two hundred twenty have completed the Connect classes since the program began in July 1992. One hundred and four participants have been placed at an average entry wage of \$6.37 per hour. Participation begins with a three week course on responsible parenthood called the Connect program. Next, participants work on improving educational levels and are placed in skills training, on the job training, or in jobs. Individual work with the participants in all aspects of their lives is at the heart of the local design. In addition to providing direct services, Futures Connection researches effective programs for disadvantaged fathers that can help inform the development of national policy.

## **The Minnesota Early Learning Design (MELD) Program**

### **Minneapolis, Minnesota**

*Roundtable Participant: Dwaine Simms*

The **Minnesota Early Learning Design's (MELD)** mission is to get families off to a good start by reducing the potential of child abuse inherent in every parent. MELD provides information and support to new parents in small, long-term groups using the peer self-help approach. The program reaches out to both custodial and non-custodial fathers, typically in the age range of 15 to 25. The program has served approximately 1,000 to 1,050 young fathers across ten replication sites. Some goals include (1) aiding community helping systems to recognize the needs and motivations of young fathers; (2) preventing paternal neglect by providing information and support about the role the young fathers might play; (3) helping young fathers handle helping systems and the barriers involved with them; and (4) providing information about childrearing and child development. MELD provides outreach and individualized services, parenting education, peer and paraprofessional support groups created around a specific curriculum for young dads, and works on building community awareness about the needs of fathers.

## **The National Institute For Responsible Fatherhood and Family Development**

### **Cleveland, Ohio**

*Roundtable Participant: Charles Ballard*

This is a non-profit, non-traditional, community based, grassroots organization that is designed to create an environment where young fathers can make life safe for themselves, their children and the mothers of their children. Since the Institute was incorporated in 1982 it has served over 2,000 young fathers, their fathers, and their families. The goal is to help young men become responsible, nurturing, resourceful fathers. The fathers are given positive images, relevant visions and the support necessary for them to assimilate these images and visions into their daily lives through one-on-one counseling and crisis management. In addition, the Institute offers a weekly father support group and mother support group, group

counseling in detention homes, and Saturday visitation to the detention home. The program takes a holistic approach to family dynamics by offering services to both mothers and grandparents. The Institute hopes to proactively address the challenges the family unit increasingly faces by helping other metropolitan areas learn and use these strategies.

**Manpower Development Research Corporation (MDRC)**

**The Parents' Fair Share Demonstration Project (PFS)**

**New York, New York**

*Roundtable Participant: Marilyn Price*

The **Manpower Development Research Corporation (MDRC)**, a nonprofit organization that designs and evaluates programs aimed at helping the disadvantaged become more self-sufficient, oversees the **Parents' Fair Share Demonstration Project (PFS)** and is conducting a multi-faceted evaluation of that project. The PFS demonstration is testing an innovative program design that provides employment and other services to non-custodial parents of children in an effort to improve their employment and earnings and their ability to support their children. Candidates for PFS include non-custodial fathers who are unemployed or underemployed and are not paying their support orders. Over 3,000 non-custodial parents were served in the pilot phase of PFS, which tested the feasibility and promise of the PFS program model. The goals of the program are: (1) to reduce poverty among children receiving public assistance by requiring non-custodial fathers to establish paternity and pay child support; (2) to provide non-custodial fathers with the education, training, and assistance needed to find employment; and (3) to help fathers learn how to nurture and support their children. Services are offered in the following basic areas: (1) employment and training activities including On-the-Job-Training; (2) mediation; (3) peer support/parenting activities; and (4) enhanced child support enforcement activities. In the current demonstration phase, MDRC will determine whether PFS is an effective and cost-effective approach to assisting non-custodial parents and reducing child poverty.

**The Parents' Fair Share Program**

**Friend of the Court**

**Grand Rapids, Michigan**

*Roundtable Participant: William Camden*

The **Parents' Fair Share** program operates through the Friend of the Court office of Kent County in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and serves unemployed, non-custodial parents who have an obligation to pay child support. The project hopes to serve a total of 540 participants over an 18-month period. Eligibility criteria for the project include: being a non-custodial parent of a child who receives AFDC, owing an AFDC or Medicaid arrearage within Michigan, having one or more Child Support Enforcement cases within Kent County, being behind schedule in paying court-ordered child support, being unemployed or underemployed, and living within commuting distance of the Parents' Fair Share site. The Kent County Friend of the Court helps these parents find job training and employment opportunities and is able to suspend existing child support obligations while participants are involved in training or seeking employment. Additional services of the project include counseling and peer support, self-esteem building, and mediation.

## **The Minnesota Parents' Fair Share Program**

**St. Paul, Minnesota**

*Roundtable Participant: David Parrish*

**Minnesota Parents' Fair Share Program (MPFS)** makes life better for children living in poverty by enhancing their economic and emotional security. Participants are non-custodial parents, usually fathers, who are unemployed or underemployed and who are behind in court-ordered child support payments to a custodial parent who receives AFDC. A total of 519 participants received program services from January 1989 to December 1993. The program is currently operated by Anoka County Jobs and Training and Dakota County Employment Training Center. MPFS combines employment and training services with enhanced child support enforcement, peer support, parenting education, and mediation services. The goals of MPFS are: (1) to improve the employment and educational opportunities of non-custodial parents resulting in long-term, stable employment with health insurance benefits at sufficient income levels; (2) to increase child support payments and health insurance coverage provided by non-custodial parents to children living in poverty; (3) to enhance the parenting and life skills of non-custodial parents; and (4) to gain the support of the larger community including elected officials and public policy makers.

## **The Operation Fatherhood Program**

**Parents' Fair Share in New Jersey**

**Union Industrial Home for Children**

**Trenton, New Jersey**

*Roundtable Participant: Barbara Kelley-Sease*

**Operation Fatherhood** is a national demonstration project which operates in seven states. The project serves non-custodial fathers whose children receive AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children). The project is designed to enhance the economic responsibility and family involvement of non-custodial fathers whose children are on welfare. Funds from the Parents' Fair Share Consortium (the U.S. Department of Human Services, the U.S. Department of Labor, and private foundations) are channeled to the Union Industrial Home for Children (UIH) through the New Jersey Department of Human Services, the lead agency. Nationally, the project is monitored by Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation. During the pilot phase, Operation Fatherhood served more than 400 men and 83 were placed in jobs by the project and many others found jobs on their own. The project serves men between the ages of 16 and 45. The five components of Operation Fatherhood are Peer Support, Case Management, Employment and Training, Mediation, and Enhanced Child Support.

## **The Parents' Fair Share in Tennessee**

**Youth Service in Memphis**

**Memphis, Tennessee**

*Roundtable Participants: Donald Mowery and Viola O'Neil*

**Parents' Fair Share in Tennessee (TN-PFS)** links intensive skill building activities with an aggressive child support system. As lead agency, Youth Service in Memphis is responsible for project management, case management, and inter-agency coordination. The program

serves non-custodial parents ages 16 to 45 who reside in Shelby County and whose children receive AFDC payments. They hope to expand the services, however, to include parents of children who are not AFDC recipients. Combining the research and demonstration phases, the program has served 453 individuals and 30 more are currently enrolled. TN-PFS components are scheduled for forty hours per week in three phases. The first five weeks include peer support and adult basic education. The following nine months consists of education, training, or employment assistance and mediation. The last phase is up to twelve months of post-placement counseling. Once in the program the participant could be offered a temporary suspension of payment of arrears, temporary reduction of current support, and allowed to receive credits against payment obligations.

**The Parents in Community Action, Inc. Program**  
**Minneapolis, Minnesota**

*Roundtable Participants: Jimmy Ferguson and Bryan Nelson*

**Parents in Community Action, Inc. (PICA)** was founded in 1969 in order to get parents involved in all aspects of their child's Head Start program. Currently, PICA is operating the Head Start program in Hennepin County, Minnesota serving 2,000 preschoolers with a waiting list of 1,000. One aspect of the program involves fifty-four bus drivers, most of whom are male, who spend at least one hour a day in a classroom, go on all field trips, attend all parent-teacher conferences, and attend all educational staff meetings. PICA also recruits men from the community as volunteer bus riders, which leads to their participation in PICA's Transportation Training Project and Child Development Training Project. The Child Development Training Project teaches parents about child development by having them work in a classroom, other than their own child's, over a six week period. The Transportation Training Project gives parents the experience and licenses necessary to apply for driving positions. As a result of this active commitment to involving men in every facet of the program, close to forty percent of the parents at PICA events are men.

**The Paternal Involvement Demonstration Project**  
**Chicago, Illinois**

*Roundtable Participant: David Pate*

The **Paternal Involvement Demonstration Project (PIDP)** seeks to demonstrate effective ways of helping young fathers secure employment to enable them to help support their families and to become actively involved financially and emotionally in the lives of their children. The project serves non-custodial, food stamp eligible fathers, who are between the ages of 18 and 35 and who have children receiving AFDC. PIDP has three components; public policy advocacy, evaluation, and the delivery of comprehensive direct services that, together, are designed to improve federal and state public policies to support rather than discourage efforts to achieve paternal involvement. The goals of the project are: (1) to provide comprehensive social, employment, parenting education, and case management services for 25 to 50 young fathers and their families per year at each of the three sites; (2) to demonstrate the effectiveness of these services by increasing employment of fathers, increasing financial support of families, reducing welfare dependency, and improving developmental outcomes of children; and (3) to secure public policies that encourage paternal involvement.

**The Penrose Family Service Center**  
**Missouri Department of Social Services**  
**St. Louis, Missouri**

*Roundtable Participant: Donell Whitfield*

The **Penrose Family Service Center** is a community-based support center that is a collaboration of different social service agencies. The Center provides integrated human services for the north St. Louis City area. There are currently approximately eighteen agencies working in the location and an additional eleven are expected to be added. The Center was established for several reasons. The first objective was to address the problem of transportation for individuals who need several different types of services. When an individual enters the Center that person is met by a family focus worker who assesses the types of services s/he may need. The Center then operates as an integrated, seamless service provider since the person can be seen by a variety of different agencies. A second objective is to enhance employment opportunities because the center is located in a hospital that went defunct in an already depressed area of St. Louis. Services offered at the center include primary health care, employment training, and education programs including a Parents' Fair Share site, child support services, court supervision services, along with other comprehensive services.

**The Father Re-Engagement Initiative**  
**Philadelphia Children's Network**  
**Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

*Roundtable Participants: Carol Auerbach, Vivian Gadsden, Thomas Henry, Greg Patton, and Ralph Smith*

The **Father Re-Engagement Initiative** works to promote and facilitate the development of integrated child-serving systems that will be effective in and accountable for producing healthy, school-ready children. A primary component of the Network is its Father Re-Engagement Initiative which seeks to improve the life chances of children living in single-parent households by encouraging and enabling young fathers to become actively involved in the lives of their children. The heart of the Initiative is the Responsive Fathers Program, a demonstration project designed to help young men develop the skills and resources they need to become effective, responsible, and self-sufficient parents. Forty-seven young fathers ranging in age from 16 to 25 are currently involved in the program. The program encourages them to enhance their educational training (basic literacy, GED, community college) and employment status so that they can serve as positive role models for their children and contribute to their financial security.

**The Public/Private Ventures (P/PV)**  
**Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

*Roundtable Participant: Wade Gatling*

**Public/Private Ventures** is a not-for-profit corporation that designs, manages, and evaluates initiatives designed to help young people, especially those from poor communities, increase their capacities to lead productive lives. P/PV works to (1) locate or create promising program models that promote young people's success in education, training, and employ-

ment; (2) test these models with rigorous, scientifically sound research; (3) mine the research results for their policy implications, and communicate the findings to local, state, and federal government decision-makers, and to leaders of the nonprofit and business sectors; and (4) create the building blocks—curricula, training materials, and technical expertise—necessary to implement the new approaches. To carry out this work, P/PV's staff of experienced researchers, program developers, and managers—with financial support from national and local foundations, corporations, and local, state, and federal government agencies—collaborates with schools and other local public institutions, employment and training organizations, national voluntary agencies, community-based organizations, and the private sector.

**The St. Bernadine's Head Start and Adult Learning Center  
Baltimore, Maryland**

*Roundtable Participant: Sheila Tucker*

The Center was funded to include a comprehensive male involvement component focusing on the inclusion of men in all service areas of the Head Start program. The center serves 213 families in Baltimore. The target population for participation are men who have a direct impact on the lives of Head Start children. These families are at risk and most effected by the lack of ongoing parental involvement. The primary objectives of the project are to: (1) provide opportunities for male orientation in the educational development of children by validating the role of the father in the family; (2) provide a male friendly environment to support and encourage positive interaction; and (3) network with other community agencies serving at risk male population to access resources in the areas of health care, legal assistance, job training, and skill development. As a part of the services offered, male participants receive extensive training in Early Childhood Education, Substance Abuse Education, and Prevention and Adult Education services.

**The Way to Grow  
Northside Family Connection  
Minneapolis, Minnesota**

*Roundtable Participant: Tene Jones*

**Way to Grow** works to establish a service delivery system to promote school readiness of children by coordinating a continuum of comprehensive, community-based services that support and assist all parents in meeting the developmental needs of their children. The target population includes families with children from birth up to six years of age. The program services approximately 500 families a year and has worked with 1,500 families since its inception. There are fifty African-American men who are part of the Fathers Program. The Fathers Program as well as the Way to Grow program work to encourage families to use existing community services; help families to build a support network; expand early identification of physiological and environmental factors which can be deterrents to school readiness; identify and support needed services for families and children; raise public awareness about the importance of healthy child development and about practices that will promote that development; and improve the quality of community services by providing programs with information, technical assistance, and incentives for coordination.

## **CONCLUSION**

The issues facing families and the field are complex, involving both social and economic forces. Central to any real *solution* is a broader and more involved role for fathers. This fundamental requirement is itself loaded with complexities, not the least of which are a confused set of expectations, inadequate preparation, and an unwillingness, on the part of social and legal forces, to assist men in their parenting role. As we have seen in countless situations, the task of developing more progressive and supportive responses to the needs of fathers and families, particularly those living in low-income homes, has been left to community agencies and organizations. These groups have expanded efforts steadily to engage, re-engage, and increase involvement of custodial and noncustodial fathers in the lives of their children. As leaders in the national discourse on practice for fathers and families, the National Practitioners Network also provide models for collaboration that results from and contributes to shared commitment.