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ABSTRACT

Noting that the inherent stressors associated with single parenting and the practical advantages of having another parent share the decision-making and emotional responsibility for children are supported by considerable research, this paper examines the effects of single parenthood on children's social and cognitive development and family functioning, focusing on children in low-income, female-headed households. Topics discussed in the paper are: (1) cultural context, social need, and family functioning; (2) the nature of social need in young, female-headed households; (3) effects of father absence on family adjustment; (4) economic effects and stress; (5) poverty and single-parent homes; (6) developmental and social issues; (7) self-esteem, emotional development, and academic achievement; and (8) social development. The paper advocates the implementation of public policies built upon the premise of "kin" as a comprehensive family form of biological and non-biological supports. The paper asserts that there are competing and inconsistent data on whether children in two-parent families fare better than children in single-parent families. However, poverty is identified as a major obstacle to family functioning in single- and two-parent households. The paper also suggests that the impact of experiencing poverty and observing undue stress may be underestimated for children in poverty and in single-parent, father-absent homes. Finally, the paper asserts that policies are necessary that promote and advance the notion of community responsibilities for children. (Contains 118 references.) (KB)

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THE ABSENCE OF FATHER:
EFFECTS ON CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY FUNCTIONING

August 1995

by

Vivian L. Gadsden
University of Pennsylvania

National Center on Fathers and Families

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The National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) is a policy research center that is practice-focused and practice-derived. Based at the University of Pennsylvania, NCOFF's mission is to improve the life chances of children and the efficacy of families by facilitating the effective involvement of fathers in caring for, supporting, and advocating on behalf of their children. Efforts are organized around three interdependent approaches: program development, a policy research and policymakers engagement component, and dissemination activities. NCOFF's research plan is developed around seven "Core Learnings," distilled from the experiences of programs and agencies serving fathers, mothers, and children around the country.

Core funding for NCOFF is provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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PREFACE

Not since the 1960s and 1970s—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 Re-search Databases and the critical literature reviews. The Databases combine citation lists, annotated bibliographies, and abstracts of research articles, reports, and volumes that fo-cus on issues implied in the Core Learnings. The critical literature reviews have been writ-ten 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 avail-able 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-coor-dinated 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-re-lated issues; surfacing of new research issues; and increased opportunities for communica-tion, cooperation, and collaboration.

Vivian L. Gadsden
Co-Director

About the Author

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The current focus on family formation and family systems in research and policy ac knowledges the changing constellations of "the American family." Perhaps the single change that has garnered the greatest interest in public reports and the popular press has been the increasing numbers of children growing up in female-headed households—ostensibly characterized by an absence of fathers from the daily functioning of the family. To the degree that these families are headed by young or teenage, never-married mothers, the alarm has sounded loudly; to the degree that these young mothers and their children constitute families in poverty, the alarm has generated new discussions about family support.

The issue of poverty is central to any discussion of single parenting and its effects on children growing up in female-headed households (Kelly and Ramsey, 1991). Whether in female-headed homes resulting from divorce or from unmarried pregnancy, children with fathers absent experience a loss of resources (Hofferth, Brayfield, Deich, and Holcomb, 1991; Krein and Beller, 1988). The problems associated with father absence become acute for families that have been victimized by chronic, intergenerational poverty, particularly African American families and other families of color that are equally victimized by discrimination. In short, the loss of income resulting from father absence reduces the capacity of single parents to be supportive, consistent, and involved in childrearing.

Despite the practical view that father absence matters, research studies provide only modest evidence for the negative consequences for children—the exception being the negative effects of lost income in the case of divorce (Vosler and Proctor, 1991; Wallerstein, 1988). This is due, in part, to the sparse data on families that deviate from "traditional intact" family forms, e.g., families headed by teenage, never-married, and/or poor mothers. In these and other single-parent homes, the consequences appear most severe for children's development of social identity, cognitive ability, emotional capacity, and social competence—each negatively affected by the loss of time and nurturance from a second parent or adult (Heath and MacKinnon, 1988). The inherent stressors associated with single parenting and the practical advantages of having another parent share the decisionmaking and emotional responsibility for children are supported by research across disciplines (Brooks-Gunn and Chase-Lansdale, 1991; McCubbin, and Figley, 1983; Hetherington and Camara, 1984). Thus, rather than ask what are the negative effects of father absence, we might well pose the question: Why does it matter that a father participates in his children's development, especially for children living in poverty and in environments with few role models of responsible fathering?

This essay focuses on children in low-income, female-headed households, specifically on the effects of single parenthood on children's social and cognitive development and family functioning. We assume in this paper that children need loving, nurturing families; that families need to be supported in providing nurturance; and that a critical component of support includes increasing the ability of *both* parents and other adults to contribute to the child's social, emotional, and cognitive development. This assumption invites at least three questions: (1) what happens to children when they have access only to one parent with limited economic and human resources, (2) what can be done to reduce the potential ravages of family dysfunction and economic instability for these children, particularly those in African American families and other families of color, and (3) do persistence and resilience, demonstrated by many

children in single-parent, low-income homes, mask problems associated with father absence and lead to underestimations of the long-term effect on children's development?

Cultural Contexts, Social Need, and Functioning within Families

In traditional, intact family models that were dominant prior to the 1960s, the role of the father was defined by a decidedly western interpretation of family functioning in which fathers provided for the economic well-being of their children and mothers ensured their children's developmental progress (Gottman and Katz, 1989; Miller, 1993). Much of family research through the 1970s focused on the degree to which ethnically diverse families, particularly African American families, adhered to this model (see Coleman, 1972; Coleman et al., 1966; McDaniel, 1994 Moynihan, 1965, 1987; Katz, 1993). Current policy is still developed around a unilinear view of families that equates effective family structure with the nuclear family model (Hofferth, Brayfield, Deich, and Holcomb, 1991; Kelly and Ramsey, 1991). Not until the recent resurgence of interest in family studies has research or policy highlighted the diversity of functioning, interactions, and expectations embedded in the cultural and ethnic histories of families and communities in the United States (Anderson, 1989; Katz, 1993); neither research nor policy addresses fully the insidious role of discrimination in reducing the strength of family development, particularly within many families of color (Miller, 1993; Trotter, 1993).

Recent studies on families and children of color (e.g., Gadsden, 1993; Gibbs and Huang, 1989; LaFromboise and Low, 1989) point to the variations in the nature of family patterns, child-parent relations, male-female relationships, and responsibilities for childrearing as communal work. For example, Gadsden (forthcoming) in a recent study builds on the role of community effort within African American families. Here the notion of extended families is broadened to include what are called "family communities"—a collection of biologically and non-biologically connected individuals who assume responsibility for the development of children. A reciprocal relationship exists between the children and the community requiring children to assume responsibility for achieving in school, avoiding criminal activities, and treating others with respect. Similarly, LaFromboise and Low (1989) describe how childrearing practices within American Indian communities are centered on the development of children's sense of self with nature and the joint responsibility of the community and family in childrearing. While some of the work over the past ten years focuses on economic disparities between Blacks and other groups (e.g., Wilson, 1987), increasingly studies examine the cultural richness and contextual variety within families—characteristics that might be harnessed to support children (Billingsley, 1993; Fitzgerald, Lester, and Zuckerman, 1995; Heath, 1983; Hill, 1972; McAdoo, 1993; Spencer, Brookins, and Allen, 1985).

Family research over the past ten years also has examined closely changes in role definitions and expectations of fathers and mothers. For example, as one result of the changing status of women in the home and labor market, significant changes have occurred in fathers' participation in their children's development, often expanding to include responsibilities for nurturing and providing daily care (Lamb, 1989). In fields such as developmental psychology, once characterized by a singular focus on mother-child relationships, the significance of the father in the daily routines of child support and nurturance is widely discussed (see Easterbrooks and Lamb, 1979; Elster and Lamb, 1986; Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, and Morgan, 1987; Furstenberg and Harris, 1993). Thus, researchers have moved beyond the boundaries of mother-child attachment and bonding (e.g., Ainsworth and Bell, 1969) to investigate

the involvement of fathers as caregivers (e.g., Cervera, 1991; Lamb, 1987, 1989) and the impact of father involvement during adolescence and over the lifespan of children (Kreppner and Lerner, 1989; Kenny, 1987). The implications of this work are that the role of fathers and the family itself contributes to the affective development of children, to the shaping of personality, and eventually to a sense of belonging, meaning, and socioemotional stability.

The Nature of Social Need in Young, Female-Headed Households

Despite growing interest in the female-headed family and concern for its effect on women and children, until recently very little has been known about the social experiences of this family form and how these families differ from intact families. This results, in part, from variations among single-parent households. Questions still persist as to whether observed differences between female-headed families and other family forms are temporary responses to recent marital disruptions or permanent characteristics of single-parent status (Compas and Williams, 1990; McLanahan, 1983, McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988). Compas and Williams (1990) found that unmarried mothers experienced more stresses and strains than their married counterparts particularly economic hassles (e.g., income for basic needs), family hassles (e.g., problems with children), and health hassles (e.g., health-related risk factors and concerns about physical well-being). Economic stress had the greatest impact, associated with reported health-related hassles and with the incidence of depressive behaviors. Like Compas and Williams, other researchers (e.g., Forehand et al., 1987; Hetherington, Cox, and Cox, 1982) have argued that the differences in reported parent and child experiences in single- versus two-parent homes can be explained by the stressors associated with single-parent family life, the nature of social support processes, and the uses of social support resources in responding to those stressors.

The problems facing teenage or young adult, never-married mothers have developed into a critical area of concern to researchers and policymakers. While models of family development and family formation patterns have changed substantially and significantly over the past three decades, the increases have been especially sharp for teenage and young, unmarried mothers who in the 1980s accounted for two-thirds of all out-of-wedlock births (Norton and Glick, 1986). This growing segment of the single-parent population is distinguished from the general population of single parents in several areas—e.g., educational attainment, knowledge of social resources, and potential earnings—but particularly in the decreased likelihood that many of the fathers, particularly African American fathers and other fathers of color, will achieve access to jobs and sustain participation in the labor market, and thus be in a position to support their children. Generally teenagers themselves or young adults with little educational preparation or job training, the young fathers share with their children's mother(s) a bleak outlook for employment or earnings that will allow them to provide for themselves and their children (Berlin and Sum, 1988; Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1986; William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship, 1988).

Even in the presence of legal mandates to support their children, many of these fathers will be unlikely to do so, not necessarily because of lack of interest or concern but primarily because of a sense of powerlessness to make adequate financial contributions to the support of their children. In this regard, young, unmarried, unemployed and underemployed fathers are no different from employed fathers separated from their children. Nonresident fathers across the board seem to be more involved with their children when they can provide the required or necessary financial support, often choosing to have no contact with the child

when their role as fathers is thwarted by economic stress (Seltzer, 1991). Unfortunately, the result for far too many families is voluntary separation of the fathers from their children, estrangement from their children's mother(s), and feelings of helplessness in the face of the responsibilities of fatherhood.

Effects of Father Absence on Family Adjustment

Studies on family adjustment to father absence, similar to other research, focus on adjustment to divorce primarily (Green and Crooks, 1988). Relatively few of the studies on role transitions to motherhood examine the effects of single parenting for teenage mothers or over the long term. The Baltimore follow-up study with adolescent mothers (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, and Morgan, 1987), begun in 1966 by Furstenberg, is an exception as are the National Household Education Survey (1991) and the National Educational Longitudinal Study (1990). Other empirical studies have focused almost exclusively on the long-term effect of single parenthood on children separated by formal or informal arrangements such as divorce and separation or as a result parental loss (Osofsky, Hann, and Peebles, 1993). Even in these studies, findings refer to adjustment immediately after marital disruption, when families are still adapting to the divorce or separation (Hetherington and Clingempeel, 1992; Maccoby, 1983). Many of these longitudinal data also show that the maladaptive effects disappear when the household economy is stabilized.

The enduring effects of living in single-parent, female-headed households remain unclear (Compas and Williams, 1990). One large-scale study of single mothers that examines these effects is the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), a longitudinal study of over 5,000 families conducted by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan (1984). Focusing on motivational factors within families, including those headed by women who were never married and who were divorced, separated, or widowed, the study has charted the economic well-being of a nationally representative sample of American families each year since 1968, testing several causal models. Findings from the study suggest that differences between individuals on psychological dimensions are the result of changes in past economic status, not related to future improvement or deterioration (see Duncan and Rodgers, 1988; McLoyd, 1990). McLanahan's (1983) secondary analysis of PSID found that female-headed families are more likely to experience chronic stress in the form of low income and low levels of social support (e.g., social networks or close relationships) and are more likely to experience acute stress in the form of major life events (e.g., role transitions to parenthood or to life as a divorcee). In addition to revealing higher rates in these areas, the data show that female heads respond more negatively to stress, in terms of self-image and views about the future.

Much of the disagreement about whether children and women in single-parent homes experience more psychological stress than those in intact families is the result of the over-reliance of researchers and policymakers on aggregate data that do not differentiate among female-headed households on measures of race, married versus unmarried status at childbearing, or persistence of poverty. When data on Black families are teased out, the severity of the problems facing those families over the long-term is salient, not only or simply as a function of poverty—debilitating in its own right—but also as a result of poorly implemented policies, racist and discriminatory practices in the labor market, and inadequate educational preparation.

Economic Effects and Stress

Recent estimates suggest that at some time during their childhood as many as 60 percent of U.S. children will live in a female-headed household (Sweet and Bumpass, 1987). Of the 17.5 million children living with one parent only in the 1980s, 37 percent were the children of divorced parents, 34 percent had parents who were never married, 24 percent had parents who were married but were separated, and 5 percent had a widowed parent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1992). In addition to the potentially far-reaching impact of single parenthood on the parents themselves, the implications for children are equally far-reaching and potentially more severe. In poor communities, a culture and legacy of poverty has been constructed over time, creating in some but not all cases an intergenerational sense of hopelessness about the ability to "make it" (Gadsden, 1993).

Researchers in countless reports (e.g., Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov, in press; Duncan and Rodgers, 1988; Garmezy, 1991; Kelly and Ramsey, 1991) identify poverty as the culprit in family disorganization and the most intractable of the effects of female-headed households, particularly within African American families. Poverty has deleterious effects on children and families whether in single- or two-parent homes. In addition to the financial strains on families, single parenthood appears to require a wider net of coping strategies and responses to daily strains. Compas and Williams (1990) found that life in a single-parent family presents a number of ongoing daily stresses and hassles for single mothers and that single mothers experience higher rates of psychological distress than married mothers. Despite the insights it provided, this research is restricted in its generalizability to nonWhite rural populations or urban populations of low-income groups of color.

Empirical evidence is inconsistent in regard to the quality of life for children and their mothers in single-parent households and the long-term effect of single parenting on family functioning. Cole and Coles (1988) note that a mother raising children alone is trying to accomplish by herself what is usually a demanding job for two adults. If there is a well-endowed network of supports in the home, e.g., grandmothers and other family members, then the severity of childrearing stress may be reduced. However, while historically the within-home, multigenerational network has been an effective source of support in several communities, e.g., the African American community, it has been weakened in many families. With increasing regularity, these families have fewer resources and support available to them. For many young, adolescent parents who are themselves the products of teenage pregnancies, the supportive, nurturing, elderly grandmother is nothing more than an historical or mythical figure. Many of the young grandmothers themselves can not support easily their children's and grandchildren's development as in the past (Elder, Conger, and Foster, 1989).

For teenage mothers and older mothers heading households, motherhood may be a lonely proposition, with increasing social isolation and diminishing support from other adults (Hetherington, 1989; Hetherington, Cox, and Cox, 1982). The mother-head may have no one to support her when her children question her authority or have anyone to act as a buffer when she is not functioning well as a parent. These problems are exacerbated when fathers can not or do not participate in decisionmaking and support, are overwhelmed by the seemingly impenetrable labor market, and feel incapacitated to contribute to the family's income or to the child's development. As stated earlier in this section, even for employed, divorced fathers, the inability to make the required child support payments often results in the fathers' failure to make any contribution at all—in financial or emotional support. Although the

problems associated with economic loss, hardship, and poverty affect parents, children are also victims, often losing access to both parents and to the modeling and social support that positive parent-child interactions afford. To understand what happens to children, however, requires that we examine what is experienced by the caregiver parent whose economic and psychological well-being ultimately affects the development of children and by the nonresident parent whose role may be unclearly defined (Seltzer, 1991). The effects of these life and economic conditions on children and families are discussed in the next two sections.

Poverty and Single-Parent Homes

The distribution and intensity of poverty have shifted significantly over the past 20 years. One out of every five children lives in a family with an income below the federal poverty line. Of the 13 million children living in poverty, 5 million are desperately poor, living in families that have an income that is less than one-half the federal poverty level (National Commission on Children, 1991). While there are differing opinions about how to categorize these families, little dispute exists about the fact that the poor are increasing, that disproportionate numbers are young and parents, and that African Americans and other people of color are overrepresented in the numbers. Particularly alarming is that the poor are increasingly young, male, minority, and relatively unskilled, facing the simultaneous and interactive effects of racial discrimination and steadily deteriorating urban labor markets to which they have limited access. As Kelly and Ramsey (1991) note, there is a mismatch between population traits and needs and labor market opportunities, decreasing the abilities of young families to sustain themselves through male participation in the labor force and increasing the attractiveness of informal economies, such as hustling and drug sales or other criminal activities (Anderson, 1990). Despite the high price such economies may exact in physical harm and incarceration, the short-term economic reward provides long-term incentives for participation. However, the effects of participation in these economies often contribute to the permanence of father absence for many children in the form of long-term incarceration or loss of life.

Poverty as a short-term experience within families is riddled with stress. When families are exposed to chronic poverty, they are confronted by a panoply of stressful conditions and events (Masten, Pellegrini, and Tellegen, 1991). More than economic loss—especially transitory economic loss—chronic poverty limits choices in all domains of life, from choice of school to choice of neighborhood; subjects individuals to the control of others, such as social workers; increases the likelihood that children will be viewed negatively and receive less positive attention and more criticism from teachers; and results in the older children often shouldering responsibility for younger siblings or the family's survival (Gouldner, 1978; McLoyd, 1990).

During recent times, almost three-fourths of the children under the age of six living in poverty were in single-parent families (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991). In the 1980s the percentage of all children under the age of six living in poverty was 24 percent. Fifty-one percent of all Black children live in poverty, 44.3 percent of all Latino children, and 18.6 percent of all White children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991). The effects of poverty on African American and Latino children, not unlike many other children, influence all other segments of their lives, from self-esteem to educational persistence. While some children demonstrate high levels of perseverance and resilience (Garmezy, 1993; Nettles and Pleck, 1994), they have the difficult, and decreasingly revered, task of "beating the odds" or prevailing in spite of the system.

The expectation that children will be able to rise above all the odds, particularly African American children living in poverty, is both unrealistic and beyond the normal expectation for most children in American society. Problems in school performance, in children's educational persistence, and in their self-perceptions regarding learning have been linked to poverty, much of it resulting from the inability of their fathers to support them in single-parent and low-income homes (Vosler and Proctor, 1991). There are several instances when it is difficult to tease out the effects of poverty from those of limited social support for children, e.g., developmental, personality, and emotional growth. The ways in which these two effects intersect provide the context for the discussion in the next section.

Developmental and Social Issues

What difference does it make to a child to live with only one parent or to grow up in a family in the absence of a father? Even when researchers control for pov erty, the findings are mixed; however, researchers are close to unanimous in citing the deleterious effects of father absence on children's development when coupled with poverty. Several researchers (e.g., Brooks-Gunn and Furstenberg, 1989; Chase-Lansdale, 1993; Furstenberg and Harris, 1993; Lerner and Ooms, 1993) have stressed the importance of studying the long-term consequences of father absence on children's development into adulthood, perceptions of family, relationships within the family unit, and the ability of families to achieve family equilibrium or organization over the long term. The child's ability to chart his or her future as learner, provider, and parent and to develop expectations of father behavior may be limited by the absence of a father or male figure who can and does model economically and emotionally supportive behavior. In father-absent, poor families, the normal patterns of reorganization after adversity may disappear. The result may be sustained disorganization which makes the family vulnerable to stress and poverty imprinted in the lives and minds of children. For lack of resources and knowledge about how to identify and best use these resources, the family's life-course may exist in a state of relative disorganization intergenerationally (Hill, 1986; Hogan, Hao, and Parish, 1990).

Studies in the social sciences and education have typically based projections of children's academic potential on mother's education attainment, rather than mother's marital status, age of first birth, father-child relationship, or environmental influences emanating from these life circumstances. While we may assume that many of the mothers in the least educated cohort of, say, African American mothers may have been unmarried, we can not act on assumptions to develop approaches to support. New directions in research by Furstenberg and Cherlin (1992), Brooks-Gunn and Chase-Lansdale (1991), Burton (1990), Lamb (in press), Lerner and Ooms (1993), Marsiglio (1988), and Ray and Harris (1995), among others, will no doubt cast light on the long-term effects of father absence. What not even this research may address, however, is the degree to which the father's position outside the labor force contributes to both his absence and children's self-perceptions regarding success (or to how children's own coping and resilience mitigate against difficult home circumstances).

Self-Esteem, Emotional Development, and Academic Achievement

Depending on the nature of the relationship that exists between the child and the parent and between the two parents, the negative effects on the self-esteem and emotional well-being of the child may range from transient consequences to radi-

cal, long-term, behavioral changes (Krein and Beller, 1988). Mulkey, Crain, and Harrington (1992) suggest that the "simple absence of a parent" is perhaps the most critical negative factor in children's poor academic achievement, not to be minimized by parents' emotional and economic problems (p. 49). When father absence is coupled with sustained poverty, children may engage in acting-out behaviors in school and home—sometimes out of anger about the lack of a male role model or out of embarrassment about being poor (Kelly and Ramsey, 1991; McLoyd, 1990). In single-parent homes with few social networks, children may feel particularly vulnerable and insecure about the reliability of the family to support them both economically and emotionally. For example, Wallerstein (1987, 1988) found that after divorce, preschoolers initially tended to worry about being abandoned by both parents. They felt responsible for causing the divorce; experienced sleep disturbances; were irritable, tearful, and aggressive; and did not want to play with other children.

Children who are in female-headed households as a result of divorce typically experience lowered academic performance and various problems of social development shortly after the divorce (Hetherington, Camara, and Featherman, 1983). Some researchers suggest that children in single-parent households do poorly in school because they lack self-control which leads them to be disruptive in classrooms (Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, and McLoughlin, 1983). Hetherington, Cox, and Cox (1982) attribute this alleged lack of self-control to the breakdown of maternal control that follows divorce. In a subsequent study, Hetherington, Camara, and Featherman (1983) observed that in the year following divorce, mothers exercised less control over their children than prior to the divorce, made fewer demands on them, and did not communicate as often. While these findings are not generalizable to other female-headed households, they provide a context for examining some of the issues of father absence.

Research on the academic impact of father absence or single-parenting on children's academic achievement focuses primarily on the effects of single-parenting on standardized test scores and children's behavior in school (Mulkey, Crain, and Harrington, 1992). Children living with one parent were found to perform less well than children in two-parent homes on vocabulary and reading (Milne et al., 1986) and on verbal and quantitative achievement (Thompson, Alexander, and Entwisle, 1988). Whereas Ware and Lee (1988) reported no significant effects of single parenting on children's test scores, Furstenberg, Morgan, and Allison (1987) found that family disruption has a moderate negative effect.

Social Development

Much of current research, though mixed, refers to the negative effects of father absence on children's social development or socialization. Some theorists claim that father absence is no more harmful than parental conflict in two-parent homes, but others emphasize the absence of another person for decisionmaking and parental control (Keith and Finlay, 1988; Mulkey, Crain, and Harrington, 1992). For example, the absence of parental control and stress is evident in children's behavior in relationship to others, e.g., in the incidence and prevalence of aggressive behaviors (Fry, 1993; Steinberg, 1987). The transmission of social values and behaviors is restricted in father-absent homes.

The social development of a child is double-sided, a process in which children become integrated into the larger social community and differentiated as distinctive individuals (Cole and Cole, 1988). One side of social development is socialization—the process by which children learn the standards and values, and acquire knowledge of their world. The second is

personality formation—the way in which children come to have a characteristic sense of themselves and a distinctive way of thinking and feeling (Damon, 1983). Socialization during early childhood is especially important because this is when children construct their understandings of their community—interpretations of adult roles and expectations gleaned from interactions with mothers, fathers, and significant others within and outside the home. Through social development, children acquire a social identity. In addition to inherited traits, the child's social identity relies on parents' physical and emotional support, models of female-male/mother-father interactions, and feelings of security, augmented often by the presence of a core of responsive and caring adults. Without these, not only is social development hampered but feelings of self-worth, motivation, and personal agency may also be affected.

The most important issues in socialization are embedded in the child's ability to understand sex-role identity, achieve self-esteem and social competence, and develop a sense of knowing (Chase-Lansdale, 1993; Heath and MacKinnon, 1988). While there is ample disagreement about the crucial factor in sex-role identification and about whether children are passive or active in structuring their own experience, the absence of the father appears to create difficulty in the full course of development for girls and boys alike. For African American boys, in particular, the problem may be more insidious in that the social expectation for acting-out behaviors is greater—even for conforming, middle-class boys in two-parent homes— and the tolerance for such behavior is less than for White boys (Gibbs, 1988; Grant, 1985; Hare and Castenell, 1985; Slaughter-Defoe and Richards, 1995). African American boys, because of the fear attached to public perception, may suffer disproportionately when their fathers are unable to model appropriate behaviors, help them sort out the personal and academic issues facing them, assist them in developing useful coping strategies, and prepare them for their roles as men and fathers (Garibaldi, 1992).

While the impact of single parenting on Black boys is highlighted in public discourse, the issues facing girls are equally compelling. Research from families of divorce, based on self-reports of mothers and children, suggests that the effect of father absence is more intense and long-term for boys than for girls. However, these data do not isolate African American girls, nor do they speak to the problems facing children who have never had fathers living at home. For African American girls, the case may not be entirely different from the experiences of African American boys. Both have been portrayed negatively in the media and public discussions. The immediacy of this situation for Black males, however, is the fear surrounding them, perpetrated in the public domain and media. The issues for both boys and girls are the quality of relationships with parents, whether living in or outside the children's home, and the children's ability to access human resources that will nurture and support them. It is an issue with implications for the child from infancy through adulthood. In the absence of an array of committed adults—fathers, mothers, and others—the ability of children to achieve personally and academically and to enjoy healthy development may be in jeopardy.

There is some evidence (e.g., Hogan, Hao, and Parish, 1990) that in many cultural contexts where there is reliance on multiple adults, the psychological functioning of family members is improved when such adults are available. For example, Kellam, Ensminger, and Turner (1977) found that first to third grade Black children were at a greater risk of poor social adaptation to school if they lived in families in which their mothers were the only adults than if they lived in either mother/father or mother/grandmother families. Mothers themselves experience less stress when adult support is available (Burton, 1990; Pearson, Hunter, Ensminger and Kellan, 1990).

While it is likely that the vested adult will be a family member, it is not necessary that the adult be a co-resident resource or biologically connected. In many ethnic communities, e.g., African American and Latino communities, the notion of "kin" refers not only to biological connections but also to a community of concerned adults who will ensure the healthy development of children. Informal adoptions, support of clearly neglected children, and short- and long-term community support for children historically have been the strength of these communities. Anecdotal evidence and interview data from several Black communities denote the role that physical and religious institutions play in ensuring the educational development of children. The act of Christian baptisms of infants is one example of the religious community's claiming right to the human and moral development of children. Pooling of resources to send children to college is still another (Gadsden, 1995).

The negative social and developmental consequences of children living in single-parent homes have been described in other literature (see, for example, Chase-Lansdale, 1993; Kiernan, 1992). Children in single-parent households often manifest socially maladaptive behaviors which result in delinquency, substance abuse, and abusive behaviors (Mulkey, Crain, and Harrington, 1992). However, it is difficult to ascertain whether these behaviors are the result of father absence alone, the nature of the relationship between the child and the family, or the culture of the particular time period. These behaviors are by no means normative for children growing up in single-parent homes or children in urban areas. In fact, recent media reports (e.g., Bill Moyers, 1991) indicate that poor children in urban areas, those in both single- and two-parent homes, are no more likely, if not less likely, to be drug users than their White, middle-class counterparts in suburbia.

Finally, the emergence of a body of work on intergenerational learning demonstrates how views about relationships, responsibility, and behaviors can be formed and transmitted over time (Germain, 1994; Stack and Burton, 1993). The subtle and direct messages conveyed to children during early socialization often dictate the course of their development. Some critics argue that what happens consistently in single-parent homes, particularly in poor families and young families without role models, is a form of social reproduction, the process by which society's institutions maintain their history of distribution of wealth (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). That is, because of the inaccessibility of income, good schooling, and job options, certain behaviors and beliefs (e.g., school dropout or pregnancy as a measure of manhood or womanhood) are socially reproduced from one generation to another and work against children's achievement and survival. Teenage mothers, fathers, and their children, for example, may be locked into reproducing behaviors such as school dropout that appear normal in their immediate environment but are not productive outside their environment (Horowitz, Klerman, Kuo, and Jekel, 1991).

If there is a critical orientation to the effects of living in a poor, single-parent home, it may exist partly in the reproduction of negative images about mobility and self-worth. When parents feel little personal efficacy and are unable to achieve academically or economically, they often transmit these negative self-images to children early during their socialization. Thus, these behaviors eventually become normative as a function of the cycle of development, poverty, and limited access. The challenge for research and policy is to construct frameworks that act primarily in favor of children—enabling single parents and children to receive support from a variety of sources—and to enhance, rather than stress, the transition period into parenthood, whether for adolescent or adult parents.

Conclusion: Promoting a Culture of Survival

The three questions posed in the early part of this paper are central to our assessment of what is needed to ensure the survival, security, and nurturance of children. Our sense of what the responses are or should be is informed, if not shaped, by a range of possibilities to support children and families and by the realities of emotional distance, hardship, and muted dreams created by a shortage of responsive adults in the lives of children. Although family formation patterns are variable, the family persists as a foundational unit for the development of children. Rather than offer a critique of current family forms, discussions about family support for children in low-income homes should focus on providing the broadest set of options for including caring adults in the daily lives of children and reducing poverty within their families. This notion of inclusion goes beyond the confines of the nuclear family as a self-contained body of individuals sharing a household. What we suggest here is the implementation of policies built upon the premise of "kin" as a comprehensive family form of biological and non-biological supports.

When children have access to only one parent with limited economic and human resources, they often are denied the strength, advice, and encouragement from adults who could serve as role models or provide for their physical and emotional needs. As a result of voluntary or involuntary father absence, children are asked to relinquish their right to two parents who can share in decisionmaking about their development and economic well-being. In the absence of at least two committed parents, children need other adults upon whom they can rely. Family studies in psychology and sociology demonstrate the importance of family cohesion or bonding in child well-being (e.g., Billingsley, 1993; Elder, 1984; Hinde and Stevenson-Hinde, 1987), over the older notion of mother-child attachment formed in the early hours after birth. For children who have access to extended families and who are nurtured by these large networks, their attachment to kith and kin increases as does their ability to deflect the assaults resulting from poverty and discrimination.

What can be done to reduce the potential ravages of family dysfunction and economic instability for these children, particularly those in African American and other families of color? Although the dysfunctional family is widely discussed, it is not clear what the structure of its alternative should be in present-day terms. If we assume that a functional family is one in which there are ample human resources for parents and children and in which there is sufficient income for families to sustain themselves and prosper, then we can begin to develop approaches that ensure functional families for all children. In addition to helping young mothers increase their capacities and abilities, rigorous approaches to preparing young fathers for employment and for contributing to their children's development are crucial. Because there are competing and inconsistent data on whether children in two-parent families fare better than children in single-parent families, we can only make modest claims about the extent to which children's development is affected by father absence or is enhanced by fathers engaged in their lives. We do not disregard the fact, however, that poverty looms as a major obstacle to family functioning in single- and two-parent households. As one experienced federal bureaucrat commented when asked what he thought was the most appropriate and effective approach to helping poor, young mothers and their families, "Give them the money! Then help them get jobs and other assistance. That's what's needed for things to work!" Perhaps this seemingly simplistic response and the experiences that inform it merit attention.

Third, do persistence and resilience by many children in single-parent, low-income homes mask problems associated with father absence and lead to underestimations about the long-term effect on children's development? Although research studies have not offered compelling evidence that children in single-parent households are more socioemotionally disadvantaged than children in two-parent households over the long term, there is much discussion about children's resilience in stress-ridden, poor homes, large numbers of which are mother-headed. Children show a remarkable ability to construct life approaches that allow them to persist in the face of adversity. However, the impact of experiencing poverty and observing undue stress may be massively underestimated for children in poverty and in single-parent, father-absent homes. There seems to be a curious pattern of unstated expectation of these children: that they have at their disposal a package of strategies which they can access readily to rise above any adverse circumstance. This view possibly reduces the development and implementation of needed supports for the children such that they are revered for their persistence and resilience but not necessarily relieved of the weighted responsibilities of self-care and survival. As Kotlowitz (1991) notes, media reports capture only a part of the lives of these children, often highlighting the one child who "made it". If we begin with the premise that fathers' participation in their children's economic and emotional well-being is important, we must create employment and other supports for fathers to participate, and we must be aware and sensitive to the needs of mothers who have the responsibility of caring for children daily.

There is no shortage of studies chronicling and documenting the relative impact of poverty on children's development. Research reports (e.g., Kelly and Ramsey, 1991; McLanahan, 1988; Center for the Study of Social Policy and the Philadelphia Children's Network, 1994) suggest that while poverty is a formidable opponent, if it were removed as a major obstacle, much of the difference in psychological effects would be reduced between single- and two-parent families. For single-parent families that are living in poverty and that are Black, the chronic nature of poverty within their communities is often the result of discrimination which can not be eliminated by reduction of poverty alone. However, if poverty were reduced as an effect of single-parent families, if policies existed that could support young families until they have developed the educational and social capacity and capabilities to assume responsibility, and if young men, particularly young African American and Latino males, could be prepared for and supported in the labor market, we very well might see a dramatic reduction in the differential effects among children and families living in single-parent and two-parent households. In short, if poverty could be eliminated as a primary obstacle to family functioning in female-headed households, many of the other problems facing these families would be diminished or the solutions might be in the grasp of the parents and families.

In promoting a culture of survival, we assume that children need access to both parents and/or to a network of supportive adults. This culture of survival requires and relies on an investment in the human capital found and nurtured in families. Policies that promote and advance the notion of community responsibilities for children encourage individuals and institutions within the community to assume active roles to ensure that each child and family has an opportunity to achieve personal and academic success. When this occurs, we will have promoted not simply a culture of survival for children but a vision of human and social prosperity for all families. Inherent to this vision is the need for a plan that increases the probability for success and captures the full range of possibilities.

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