

# ISSUE BRIEFS

## on

# Responsible Fatherhood

JustPartners, Inc. with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation



### Contents

1. The Vision for Responsible Fatherhood
2. Responsible Fatherhood's Contribution to Child, Family & Community Well-Being
3. Accomplishments of the Responsible Fatherhood Field
4. Different Fathers Face Different Challenges
5. Fathers of Color Face Tougher Odds
6. Bipartisan Support for Fatherhood Policy
7. Good Practice Through Accumulated Experience

*Prepared with the support of the Annie E. Casey Foundation by Paula Dressel of JustPartners, Inc., Baltimore, MD, [www.justpartners.org](http://www.justpartners.org). The author thanks the National Fatherhood Leaders Group for their guidance in this work. The findings and conclusions presented in this document are those of the author alone. As such, they do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation or those who offered input.*

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January, 2010

# *Issue Briefs*

## on Responsible Fatherhood

### Contents

<b>#1</b>	<b>The Vision for Responsible Fatherhood .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>#2</b>	<b>Responsible Fatherhood’s Contribution to Child, Family, &amp; Community Well-Being .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>#3</b>	<b>Accomplishments of the Responsible Fatherhood Field .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>#4</b>	<b>Different Fathers Face Different Challenges .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>#5</b>	<b>Fathers of Color Face Tougher Odds .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>#6</b>	<b>Bipartisan Support for Fatherhood Policy .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>#7</b>	<b>Good Practice Through Accumulated Experience .....</b>	<b>13</b>



## The Vision for Responsible Fatherhood

The nation's ongoing strength depends on each generation stepping up to its leadership roles and responsibilities in our families and our communities. One enduring expectation is that the next generation should be able to stand on the shoulders of those who came before them. Those beliefs and aspirations have given this country its success and maintained its hope and promise generation after generation. These values are built on the foundation of **strong families**.

In the midst of changing family structures, shifting social norms, and tough economic times that make a growing number of families vulnerable, doing right by our children remains a bedrock principle. It is a principle governed by the notion of **mutual responsibility** — parents doing their part, and the government promoting policies that affirm and support parents' capacity to do their family work well. Changing family structures have complicated this bargain. By 2008, fully 30% of children lived with only one or neither of their parents. The most typical households without both parents present are those where children live with their mothers only — 23% of all children. Yet, this overall statistic clouds dramatic variations in vulnerability by race/ethnicity: 51% of African American children, 24% of Hispanic children, and 16% of White children live without a father in the home ([www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/famsoc1.asp](http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/famsoc1.asp)). Overall, 24 million children (1 out of 3) live absent their *biological* fathers (U.S. Census Bureau, CPS, 2008, Table C9).

Almost 20 years ago, the National Commission on Children highlighted the troubling level of father absence and its relationship to child poverty. Research has documented additional effects of father absence on child well-being: academic performance, school behaviors and attitudes, later-life earnings, chances of living in a low-opportunity neighborhood, high-risk behaviors, juvenile delinquency, self-esteem, and inter-personal relationships. Father absence takes its toll on government, too: one conservative estimate is that father absence costs taxpayers \$100 billion per year (*The One Hundred Billion Dollar Man: The Annual Costs of Father Absence*, National Fatherhood Initiative, 2008).

The vision for Responsible Fatherhood, then, follows from this larger context:

- **All children should have the love, care, emotional, and financial support of both parents, regardless of whether the parents live together or not.** Responsible fathers — who play key roles in child development and family economic success — help to create strong families, and strong families lead to good outcomes for children.
- **Fathers should take personal responsibility for their children and have the necessary resources to fulfill their parenting roles.** For this to happen, at a minimum fathers must acknowledge paternity, have access to jobs with decent income and benefits, develop effective fathering and relationship skills, and find support for their family roles in public policies.
- **Policies and programs should affirm and promote responsible fatherhood.** Strengthening fathers promotes strong family values and long-term cost-savings by enhancing family self-sufficiency and community well-being.

At the time that the National Commission on Children issued its report, family policy was largely mother- and child-focused. The media tended to portray fathers negatively as “deadbeat dads.” There were few advocates and no shared message about the importance of fathers.

But in the last fifteen years, **bipartisan support** has emerged for Responsible Fatherhood at federal, state, and local levels, thanks to a growing and cohesive field of advocates, researchers, and practitioners (See Issue Brief #3). And coverage of fathers has turned away from “deadbeat” imagery to understand that some dads are “dead broke” and that more dads than we ever imagined want to be engaged with their children. More and more **fathers are doing their part** — establishing paternity, paying child support, developing job skills for longer-term financial stability, and improving their fathering and relationship skills. Another sector of dads shares much in common with moms. These are the “dead tired” dads who are unable to be as involved in their children’s lives as they would like due to struggles in balancing work and family (*Pop’s Culture: A National Survey of Dad’s Attitudes on Fathering*, National Fatherhood Institute, 2006). In short, we are still not where we need to be — for the sake of our children’s future and our country’s health.

Realizing the vision for Responsible Fatherhood will mean:

- Our children are better off and better positioned to build their own strong families.
- Families are better off because of fathers’ love, care, emotional, and financial support .
- Taxpayers will spend less when public dollars are more wisely used to support father presence, rather than make up for father absence.

The return on the investment in Responsible Fatherhood is nothing short of a **stronger nation** — for generations to come.

# Responsible Fatherhood's Contribution to Child, Family, & Community Well-Being

Few issues in public life find greater agreement across the population than our recognition of the importance of fathers for child and family well-being. In one poll, 97% of respondents said that fathers were just as important as mothers in proper child development. And a national survey found that 96% of respondents agreed that parents should share equally in the caretaking of children. (Both cited in *Father Facts*, 5th Edition, 2007 National Fatherhood Initiative. Unless otherwise noted, all references for statements in this Brief come from this source.) Public opinion in this case is highly aligned with what research tells us about father presence and father absence. Here's a snapshot:

## **Children are better off when their fathers are actively engaged in their lives:**

- Fathers' love, care, and emotional support are positively linked to good social, emotional, and cognitive development in their children in terms of academic achievement, lower rate of risky behaviors and contact with the juvenile justice system, pro-social behavior, emotional health, and healthy self-esteem.
- A father's stable economic contributions improve the chances that children will grow up in higher-opportunity neighborhoods, avoid material hardship, and avoid being homeless.
- Children with involved fathers have positive models for their own relationships and eventual parenting and are more likely to develop into responsible young adults.

## **Families are better off when fathers fulfill their responsibilities:**

- A father's involvement in child rearing can have a positive impact on his relationship with the mother, which in turn positively affects the child. Reciprocally, when a respectful relationship exists between a father and a mother, the father is more likely to be actively involved in his child's life.
- When fathers are responsible, contributing parents, they are more likely to view themselves -- and to be viewed by mothers -- as viable marriage partners.

## **Communities are better off when policies and programs support responsible fathering:**

- Fathers who receive services like job training and placement are better positioned to succeed economically and contribute to their families and communities.
- Involved fathers are less likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system.
- Men who live with their children are more involved in community activities and service organizations and are less likely to engage in risky, unhealthy or anti-social behavior, providing positive role models for their own and other children in the community.

### Taxpayers are better off when fathers step up for their children:

- Funding spent on federal child support collection is cost-effective. The child support program *collects \$4.73 in support payments for families for every public dollar spent* ([www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/0450.pdf](http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/0450.pdf)).
- One conservative estimate is that father absence costs taxpayers \$100 billion per year in direct services and supports for father-absent households (*The One Hundred Billion Dollar Man: The Annual Costs of Father Absence*, National Fatherhood Initiative, 2008).
- Children who grow up in single-mother households tend to attain lower levels of education and earn less as adults, thereby reducing their potential contribution to income, property, and sales taxes and increasing the likelihood that they will need additional financial support as adults.

Given the robust benefits that come from having fathers engaged in their children's lives, **how are fathers doing?** Thanks to the Responsible Fatherhood field, **meaningful changes** have occurred in the last 15 years:

- **More fathers** are declaring paternity: in 2007, 90% of fathers did so, compared with 64% in 1998 (HHS data reported by Center for Law and Social Policy).
- **More fathers** live with their children. According to the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey, 32.7% of children now live absent their biological fathers. This is a 5% reduction from the 2004 level of 34.5%. Although it may be too early to tell if this trend is a long-term one, this level of change has not been seen in three decades, and is therefore encouraging news.
- **More fathers** are stepping up to pay child support. Resources are available for more children because of significant movement toward a "culture of compliance" in child support collection rates -- from 20% in 1996 to 54% in 2006 (HHS data reported by Center for Law and Social Policy).

The bargain of **mutual responsibility** — that fathers do their part, and that the government promotes policies that support their capacity to do well by their children — is paying off. More children are better off, and families, communities, and the nation are stronger as a result.



# Accomplishments of the Responsible Fatherhood Field

The level of bipartisan support for policies to promote successful fathering is testimony to over fifteen years of groundwork. Since 1994, a growing force of advocates has sought to build a national commitment to improve child outcomes through the promotion of Responsible Fatherhood. In this current high profile moment for fatherhood, it would be easy to forget that these achievements, like all others, are the hard-won fruit of inter-related goals, any one of which is labor-intensive: (1) the search for common ground across advocates, (2) the reduction of stereotypes and stigma around issues that can sabotage policy interest, and (3) the creation of an infrastructure and capacity in the field of Responsible Fatherhood to do the consistent advocacy work needed, as well as craft programs and practices that produce good results for fathers and their families.

Thanks to this hard work, today we see measurable improvements for children, amidst still unfinished business:

- The share of low-income children living without a father present has **dropped** from 50% to 42%. (Data from 1995 and 2006, respectively. Source: [http://www.childtrends.databank.org/tables/4\\_Table\\_2.htm](http://www.childtrends.databank.org/tables/4_Table_2.htm) )
- The proportion of teenage women giving birth has **dropped** from 58/1,000 to 42/1,000. Repeat teen births have declined by 20%. (First comparison data from 1995 and 2006, respectively. Source: [http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr57/nvsr57\\_07.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr57/nvsr57_07.pdf), Table 4, ages 10-19. Second statistic compares rates for 1990 and 2004, Child Trends, [http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child\\_Trends-2007\\_10\\_25\\_RB\\_Repeat.pdf](http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2007_10_25_RB_Repeat.pdf) )
- Dramatically more children now have paternity **established** -- from 64% to 90%. (Data from 1998 and 2007, respectively, reported by the Center for Law & Social Policy)
- Resources are **available** for more children because of significant movement toward a “culture of compliance” in child support collection rates -- from 20% to 54%. (Data from 1996 and 2006, respectively, reported by the Center for Law & Social Policy)

How was this able to happen?

1. A **big tent** was created. Previously fragmented advocates and practitioners convened in 1994 at then Vice President Gore’s annual Family Re-Union conference to produce a common ground agreement that men be required, encouraged, and enabled to accept the responsibility to contribute to the social, emotional, and economic well being of their children, regardless of whether those fathers lived in the same home as the children (R. Smith, Introduction to R. Lerner, *Liberty*, Sage Publications, 2004). Here, and at the First National Summit on Fatherhood held shortly thereafter, affinity was crystallized around the notion of *responsibility*. Further, to ensure that the fatherhood field learns from and speaks to the range of fathers and their advocates, active outreach has occurred to include fathers across economic and racial-ethnic groups, formerly incarcerated fathers, men and women working to reduce domestic violence, and advocates for healthy marriage.

2. The **climate for policy** improved. The research-based advocacy of the Responsible Fatherhood field succeeded in shifting Images of fathers from “deadbeat dads” to the growing realization that too many dads are “dead broke” and that most fathers, even when they don’t live with their children, want to be engaged (*Father Facts*, 5th Edition, 2007, National Fatherhood Initiative). Armed with research documenting the devastating effects on children from father absence, policy-makers increasingly embraced actions that would address the barriers men face to helping their children do well. Also, advocates pointed to a growing body of research showing the link between father absence and the nation’s seemingly most intractable social problems — poverty, crime, and drug abuse. Actions to promote Responsible Fatherhood came through an Executive Memorandum, legislation, and agency uptake at the federal level; initiatives and policy change at the state level; and programmatic innovations locally. (See Issue Briefs #6 and #7 for details.)
3. A **robust field** of Responsible Fatherhood was born and developed, with government and private support. A full-capacity infrastructure now exists to shape and influence the field, inform policy, demonstrate good practice, and advance applied research. The National Fatherhood Leadership Group of ten field-shaping organizations reflects the big tent of the Responsible Fatherhood movement. In addition to the increase in stand-alone fatherhood programs, the uptake of fatherhood work has occurred in mainstream family-serving organizations and other institutions. Head Start programs, correctional agencies, YMCAs, family practice organizations, and almost 100 local foundations have made Responsible Fatherhood a core part of their work because they recognize that their missions will not be accomplished without the active and constructive engagement of fathers. (See Issue Brief #7 for more practice-focused details.)

These fifteen years have taught the field a number of **important lessons** (Urban Institute, *Ten Key Findings from Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives*, February, 2008), including the following:

- ⇒ There is no substitute for bringing a diverse group of stakeholders together to reach consensus around policy and practice change.
- ⇒ Being a good father is very important to non-resident fathers.
- ⇒ Low-income fathers in particular, and especially fathers of color, face considerable employment barriers as they seek to do well by their children. (See Issue Brief #5.)
- ⇒ Relational and fathering skills, as well as financial sufficiency, are important ingredients for Responsible Fatherhood.

A large number of soon-to-be completed programmatic evaluations (Knox et.al., *Policies that Strengthen Fatherhood and Family Relationships: What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know?* August 2009) promise to teach the field a lot more.

## Different Fathers Face Different Challenges

Whatever fathers' circumstances, most men agree that being a father is a strong social identity (*Pop's Culture: A National Survey of Dads' Attitudes on Fathering*, National Fatherhood Initiative, 2006). But, depending on fathers' circumstances, this is easier said than done. This brief takes a look at fathers facing four different (and sometimes overlapping) challenges to achieving the kinds of relationships that children need to be successful and that fathers need to feel that they've done their job. It is generally agreed that responsible fathering includes a declaration of paternity, the ability to fulfill financial obligations, relational skills to maintain a high quality marriage — or a low-conflict relationship with the mother where marriage is not possible, and fathering skills to love, care for, and emotionally support the child. The Responsible Fatherhood field has worked to see that these are addressed within its big tent by determining strategies that keep dads and kids in different circumstances connected — for their mutual well-being.

### Low-Income Non-custodial Fathers

The majority of fathers in this group are present at the birth of their child and provide financial and emotional support to the mother during pregnancy. Mothers want them to remain engaged with their child even if the romantic relationship ends ([www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=16305](http://www.ncsl.org/default.aspx?tabid=16305)). Early multi-site interventions sought to break down service silos for these dads by providing employment and training support, child support enforcement, and personal skill-building. This work taught the Responsible Fatherhood field about the importance of:

- Offering employment supports for both skill-building and job retention. It also provided a sober view of how deep fathers' needs run and the innovations that would be needed in training and job ladders to significantly improve the economic prospects for this group of dads.
- Bringing mothers into the picture to address their concerns and create shared expectations around fathering and co-parenting.
- Reaching fathers early on, while their children are young and the parents' relationship is more amenable to shared aspirations.
- Offering incentives for participation in fatherhood programs, given this economically challenged group of fathers. (Knox et al., *Policies that Strengthen Fatherhood and Family Relationships: What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know?* August 2009)

### Teen Fathers

When young men have children, the pregnancy is usually unplanned and usually occurs outside of marriage. The young father confronts considerable challenges, including the ability to complete his education, support a family financially, and establish a stable relationship with the mother. Compared with other fathers, teen fathers have less involvement with their children and are less likely to employ positive parenting styles when they do. They are also more likely to have children with multiple women, thus compounding the challenges faced by the father, the children, and the mothers. Intervention early on when a first child arrives is a crucial moment for improving the long-term outcomes for both the father and his children. Even though teen birth rates are declining, over one million males ages 15-19 have a child. (*Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight/Teen Fathers*, National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse)

**By the Numbers...**

<b>Young men 15-19 with a child</b>	<b>1,020,800</b>
<b>Households with minor children affected by father’s incarceration</b>	<b>300,900</b>
<b>Fathers in the military with children under 23 (est.)</b>	<b>503,749</b>
<b>% of total child support arrears owed by parents with &lt;\$10k annual income</b>	<b>70%</b>

**Incarcerated Fathers**

Fathering while in prison is not impossible, but it faces considerable obstacles. About six in ten incarcerated fathers have some kind of monthly contact with their children, but a majority do not receive visits from their children throughout the time they are locked up. Yet, such contact is a key predictor of the father’s ability to re-enter the community once his time is served and not return to prison again. Most incarcerated fathers held jobs prior to imprisonment, and their loss of income compromises families. Pre-existing child support obligations may continue to accrue, making released fathers vulnerable to re-incarceration for child support arrearages. Their children are themselves disproportionately vulnerable to contact with the juvenile or criminal justice systems throughout their lives and can experience immediate and ongoing difficulties from shame, stigma, poorer academic performance, disruptive behavior, and loss of contact with their father. Promising approaches to overcoming the challenges these dads face include fathering and relationship education programs in prisons, opportunities for enhanced child visitation, educational and job readiness programs, and substance abuse treatment. (*Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight/Fathers and Incarceration*, National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse; <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/08/MFS-IP/Incarceration&Family/ch7.shtml>)

**Military Fathers**

Deployment of military fathers is associated with increased behavioral problems by their children, especially boys. Research has also found that children experience academic and adjustment problems, as well as depression and anxiety. Fathers deployed to combat regions exhibit stress levels and separation conflicts that render married fathers more likely to divorce. The probability of spousal violence increases with the length of deployment (*Responsible Fatherhood Spotlight/Fathers in the Military*, National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse). Resources are available to prepare families before a father leaves, keep them in touch in his absence, and facilitate the adjustment upon his return.

While Responsible Fatherhood has common aspirations across all fathers — the ability to provide love, care, emotional, and financial support for the child, and the importance of a good relationship with the mother — it is critical to address the diverse needs of different fathers to be able to achieve these goals.

## Fathers of Color Face Tougher Odds

Our nation's well-being depends on tapping the potential of each new generation. In an increasingly diverse nation, where communities of color are projected to become the majority of the U.S. population by 2050 (<http://fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/RL32701.pdf>), we must rededicate our attention to ensuring that ALL children have the opportunity to succeed. Yet, fathers of color face tougher odds for doing well by their children. Virtually every indicator of individual, family, and community well-being shows troubling and deep-seated disparities by race (Kirwan Institute, *Racial Equity Status Report*, September, 2008), including those directly connected to fatherhood. We cannot be strong as a nation until these tougher odds are addressed.

### The Barriers for Fathers of Color

The Responsible Fatherhood field has come to understand that men need financial stability as a part of the platform for being successful fathers. Like other opportunities, financial stability is highly connected to where people live — in this case, for the availability of good schools for adequate preparation, and access to jobs with decent income and benefits. Yet, men are not equally situated in terms of these opportunities. Blacks and Latinos represent nearly three out of four residents in metro neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, where schools underperform, jobs have disappeared, foreclosures are high, and residents are stigmatized (Source: Kirwan Institute, *Opportunity Matters: African American Males and Access to Communities of Opportunity*, September, 2008). Of the 444 high-poverty non-metro counties in the U.S. where jobs are also difficult to find, three-fourths of these have high populations of low-income families of color ([www.ers.usda.gov/amberwaves/February04/Features/Anatomy.htm](http://www.ers.usda.gov/amberwaves/February04/Features/Anatomy.htm)). In addition, nearly one-third of Native Americans living on Native lands experience poverty ([www.ruralhome.org/storage/documents/nativeamerinfosheet2.pdf](http://www.ruralhome.org/storage/documents/nativeamerinfosheet2.pdf)).

These structural factors set in motion cultural forces that further contribute to the tougher odds fathers of color face. The barriers, prejudices, and profiling that residents in low opportunity locations experience can affect their understandings about “the way the world works” and produce self-defeating responses to the broader social forces (William Julius Wilson, *More Than Just Race*, W.W. Norton, 2009).

### The Disproportionate Consequences for Children of Color

Children of color also experience the tougher odds their fathers face. For example:

- African American, Latino, and Native American children are more likely to live in single-parent families. The 2007 data show that 65% of non-Hispanic Black children, 49% of American Indian children, 37% of Hispanic children, 23% of non-Hispanic white children, and 17% of Asian American and Pacific Islander children reside in single-parent families (Kids Count Data Center, 2009).
- Racial inequities continue to play out for children's families, rendering them more economically vulnerable. The 2007 data show that 35% of African American, 33% of American Indian, and 27% of Latino children live in poverty compared to their white (11%) and Asian (12%) counterparts (KIDS COUNT Data Center, 2009).
- Given these structural factors, the many indicators of child well-being such as school performance, emotional health, and behavioral risk-taking also show disproportionate negative impacts on children of color.

### A Call for a Rededication to Opportunities for ALL Fathers

To address the tougher odds faced by fathers of color, policies and programs for fathers and their families must be race-informed and should be assessed for their equitable impact. All fathers need financial stability, a good relationship with the mother of their child, and positive fathering skills. Understanding the particular barriers that face fathers of color will produce improved policies and practices that yield results for a more diverse set of fathers — an approach known as “targeted universalism” (John Powell, “Post-racialism or targeted universalism?” *Denver University Law Review*, v.86, 2009). Improved results will follow from the recognition that some fathers are differently situated as a consequence of broader racial dynamics and thus may need different supports and services to achieve the aspirations of Responsible Fatherhood. For men of color, who are disproportionately relegated to low-opportunity neighborhoods and communities, a *targeted* universalism approach would address issues like the following:

- Because **schools** have too often under-served young men (and young women) of color, attention must be given to the disparities of resources, qualified teachers, curricular offerings, and student expectations that characterize low-opportunity locations — factors that spur young people to lose faith in themselves and their possibilities and seek alternate, self-destructive pathways to adulthood.
- Because **good jobs** are typically located outside their neighborhoods or communities, attention must be given both to transportation and access to available jobs and the transformation of disinvested neighborhoods and counties to high-opportunity settings where jobs more readily locate.
- Because men of color are disproportionately caught up in the criminal justice system, attention must be given to reducing racial profiling, providing opportunities for active fathering from prison, and offering skills development that will enable the successful **restoration** of men to their families and communities upon re-entry.
- If men’s circumstances have led them to conclude that they cannot be — or need not be — responsible fathers, attention must be given to setting realistic expectations for fulfilling parental obligations, combined with programs and supports that enable fathers to contribute productively to their families and communities in ways that reinforce **mutual responsibility**.
- Because our nation should not maintain or reproduce low-opportunity neighborhoods or communities for anyone, attention must be given to connecting people and places with **opportunities** such as affordable housing, good schools, accessible jobs, healthy and safe environments, responsive public services, and access to quality, fairly priced retail goods and financial services.

We will be a stronger nation with stronger families when we intentionally address the racial disparities that confront fathers of color.

## Bipartisan Support for Fatherhood Policy

The “mutual responsibility” that guides the Responsible Fatherhood movement calls for government to promote policies that affirm and support parents’ capacity to do their family work well. Bipartisan interest in, and support for, Responsible Fatherhood at the **federal level** can be traced through the five most recent Presidential administrations:

- In the **Reagan administration**, the Secretary of Health and Human Services launched a Young Unwed Fathers research and demonstration project. Fathers received national policy attention in the 1988 Family Support Act, which linked employment and training services to child support obligations, launched national demonstrations to test policy and practice, and emphasized paternity establishment.
- Under **President George H.W. Bush**, the USDHHS created the Minority Male Initiative, which offered multi-year funding to community collaborations to provide vulnerable minority youth with skills to succeed as parents and workers.
- Diverse fatherhood advocates and practitioners convened in 1994 at **Vice President Gore’s** annual Family Re-Union conference to seek common ground around issues, perspectives, and messages. The meeting produced a fundamental agreement that continues to hold the field together today: that men be required, encouraged, and enabled to accept the responsibility, grounded in paternity acknowledgement, to contribute to the well-being of their children, regardless of whether those fathers live with their children.
- A year later **President Clinton** issued an Executive Memorandum to all federal agencies to include fathers in their work. The USDHHS responded by creating the Fatherhood Initiative. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) sought to strengthen federal and state child support enforcement programs.
- In the administration of **President George W. Bush**, the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 included \$50M each year from 2006-2010 for fatherhood and parenting programs, such as relationship skill-building, financial counseling, responsible parenting training, programs to improve the economic status of fathers, and a national clearinghouse for policy and practice assistance to states and communities. The child support provisions of the Act reflect a bipartisan understanding of research showing that child support collection is less effective if payments are kept by the government rather than passed on to families. The new rules authorized states to pay more collected child support to children in families who currently receive TANF or have received it in the past.
- **President Barack Obama** created the White House Task Force for Fatherhood and Healthy Families, which is conducting regional town forums around the country to highlight what dads, organizations, and communities are doing and must do to address the challenges fathers and families face.

Bipartisan Task Forces on Responsible Fatherhood, organized in the mid-1990s by the National Fatherhood Initiative, work in the Senate and House to ensure that fatherhood issues remain on the legislative agenda.

Bipartisan support for the work of Responsible Fatherhood can be found at the **state level**, too. Almost all states have policies or programs to strengthen fathers, whether through work supports, revised TANF eligibility rules to promote responsible fatherhood, or the prevention of too-early fatherhood. A growing number of correctional facilities and Head Start settings have developed core fatherhood programs as central components of their work.

But the work will not be done until all children have the love, care, emotional, and financial support of their parents.



## Good Practice Through Accumulated Experience

Good practice is grounded in experience and based on research. Early on in the development of the Responsible Fatherhood field, the National Center on Fathers and Families tapped both the combined wisdom of frontline practitioners and available family research to produce the field's Core Learnings. These platform ideas, that have since guided the development of the Responsible Fatherhood field, are as follows:

- **Fathers care**-- even if that caring is not shown in conventional ways.
- **Father presence matters** -- in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development.
- **Role transitions may be problematic**—The transition from biological father to committed parent has significant developmental challenges for young fathers.
- **Joblessness is a major impediment** to family formation and father involvement.
- **Systemic barriers exist** -- Approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment can create obstacles and disincentives to father involvement.
- **A co-parenting focus is needed** -- A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the vital skills needed to share parenting responsibilities.
- **Intergenerational learning occurs** -- The behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced significantly by the beliefs and practices they learned within their families of origin.

More recently the Urban Institute identified ten key findings from five major fatherhood demonstration programs in the 1990s and earlier part of this decade (K. Martinson & D. Nightingale, "Ten Key Findings from Responsible Fatherhood Initiatives," February, 2008). These reinforce certain Core Learnings from a decade before and include:

- Being a **good father** is important to nonresident fathers.
- Low-income fathers and mothers face **significant barriers** such as low education levels and limited work histories that can be complicated by lack of transportation, housing instability, health and mental health problems, substance abuse, and involvement in the criminal justice system.
- A host of issues make **recruitment and enrollment** a challenge in many fatherhood programs.
- Programs have had difficulty establishing **employment services** that improve how non-resident fathers fare in the labor market.
- Services related to **child support** are a critical program component and generally show good results.
- **Child support orders** are often set at levels fathers are unable to pay.
- Child support enforcement agencies need to **collaborate** with fatherhood programs and respond to the circumstances of low-income fathers.
- **Co-parenting** issues need to be addressed.
- **Systemic change** is needed to take the work to scale.
- Lack of long-term **sustainability strategies** by fatherhood programs inhibits the development of program capacity and innovation.

The Responsible Fatherhood field continues to build on this knowledge and experience in order to respond to the challenges men face in becoming effective fathers.

### Response and Innovation

Responsible Fatherhood practitioners continue to deepen their understanding of what works for fathers. Some of the most recent discoveries and practice innovations include:

- The “magic moment” and the “**daddy moment.**” Fatherhood practitioners have long emphasized that the time when a baby is born represents an optimal moment for interventions that can solidify father involvement and strengthen couple relationships. More recent applied research suggests that there actually is a two to three year period when non-resident fathers typically remain involved with their children, a time period that provides a longer window for engaging men and providing family-strengthening services to couples ([www.mnfathers.org/documents/May2008.pdf](http://www.mnfathers.org/documents/May2008.pdf)).
- **Co-location of fatherhood supports.** The recognition that — at minimum — effective fathers need financial stability, good relationship skills, and positive parenting skills has led to the development of more comprehensive supports and services that fathers can access in single trusted locations that are culturally sensitive to the fathers and families they serve.
- Alliance with **domestic violence** and **healthy marriage** practitioners. Responsible Fatherhood practitioners have increasingly collaborated with these groups, since research shows that healthy marriages provide the optimal environment in which fathers can have close, long-term relationships with their children and the children’s mothers.
- Use of **existing networks** to increase the scale of fatherhood work. Important vehicles for the sustainability of fatherhood efforts are those national networks where children are found and fathers have value to add (e.g., Head Start programs). Other networks that should be leveraged include institutions where large numbers of men can be found and where a focus on fatherhood would add value (e.g., the military, prisons). The for-profit community can become involved by providing supports for work-family balance through their human resources and employee assistance programs.
- Systematic availability of **practitioner information** and guidance. The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse ([www.fatherhood.gov](http://www.fatherhood.gov)) provides a first-source location for professionals operating Responsible Fatherhood programs, where they can get the latest data and research, promising practices, operational tips, state profiles, and other resources based on the field’s knowledge and experience.

### Opportunities Ahead

For even better results for all children, the Responsible Fatherhood field needs:

- Consistent funding for the sustainability of its work and the assessment of its programs.
- Additional service networks to appreciate and lift up the positive role that men and fathers can play (e.g., family planning, early education, PTAs) and co-location of fatherhood services with other family services.
- Continuing bipartisan support.



**The Annie E. Casey Foundation**

701 St. Paul St.  
Baltimore, MD 21202  
[www.aecf.org](http://www.aecf.org)

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