

# THE HERR RESEARCH CENTER AT ERIKSON INSTITUTE

Number 2  
Fall 2000

# Father Care

AS THE FOCUS ON FATHERING EXPANDS IN THE RESEARCH, PROGRAM, AND PUBLIC POLICY SECTORS, ERIKSON INSTITUTE IS SEEKING A FULLER UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT FATHER CARE MEANS IN LOW-INCOME, CULTURALLY DIVERSE COMMUNITIES. THE ULTIMATE GOAL: TO DEVELOP WAYS TO HELP FATHERS REMAIN ANCHORED TO THEIR CHILDREN AND GENERATIVE THROUGHOUT THEIR LIFESPAN.

## Redefining Fatherhood in Low-Income Communities

*Daria Zvetina*

Although a substantial literature on fathers has developed over the past 30 years, until recently, low-income fathers have been largely forgotten in both research and policy initiatives directed at ameliorating the effects of poverty on children and families. Moreover, when they have been remembered it has not been kindly.

With rising rates of nonmarital births, the popular image of fatherhood in poor communities, particularly African-American communities, has been one of absenteeism, suggesting that fathers play at best a marginal role in the day-to-day functioning of families. This image has been heightened by legislative policies such as the 1988 Family Support Act, which focused on

noncustodial fathers who did not pay child support. This legislation drew public attention to the absence of many low-income fathers from the homes and economic providership of their children. The image of low-income fathers as absent from their children's lives has also been reinforced by welfare policies that have included economic disincentives for cohabitation, yet, to expedite child support payment to the states, have tied receipt of benefits to paternity disclosure.

As these welfare and child support enforcement initiatives illustrate, the involvement of fathers has been broadly equated with economic support and residence in

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# From the Dean

FRANCES STOTT, P.H.D.

Fatherhood in low-income communities is featured in this issue of *Applied Research in Child Development*. For several years, Erikson colleague Aisha Ray has studied, written about, and worked with fathers in these communities. This is an important and timely issue, for despite the fact that we know that when fathers are involved, their children do better, we don't yet know much about low-income fathers and how they care for their children. Professor Ray's research is extremely significant—partly because it presents new knowledge, but also because it contributes to the policy and practice issues that affect the lives of these men and their families.

There has been much discussion recently about the merits of research collaborations between universities or between universities and community agencies—each bring distinct perspectives to bear on problems. At Erikson we also benefit greatly from another form of collaboration—that between faculty and doctoral

students, especially since our doctoral students enter the program with a master's degree and experience in the field (see **New Doctoral Students**, p. 17). An example of such a collaboration is the work of Professors Jie-Qi Chen and Gillian McNamee with doctoral students Ann Masur and Jennifer McCray. The ambitious project (see **Research Update**, p. 17) requires all four researchers to bring their unique experiences to the effort.

Jie-Qi Chen takes primary responsibility for refining the research questions and planning the data analysis. Drawing heavily on her previous work with Howard Gardner at Harvard University, she contributes thinking about how to assess a variety of strengths children bring to classroom tasks. Gillian McNamee holds the vision for helping future teachers use the assessment information. She brings her long history of studying early literacy development as well as her expertise in teacher education. Ann Masur, a former teacher and

learning disability specialist, helps the group make acute observations and analyses of what children are doing when they're in the middle of a task. Completing the team, Jennifer McCray brings her keen mind to bear on theoretical and logical inconsistencies as well as her knowledge of the emotional life of the child. The lively exchange of ideas and roles in collaborations such as this benefits mentors and apprentices alike, and serves to strengthen the research process at Erikson.

This fall an Occasional Paper on financing after-school programs in Chicago will be distributed. The spring 2001 issue of *Applied Research in Child Development* will focus on welfare reform and the implications for families.

We welcome your interest in our efforts and encourage you to comment, question, or critique any aspect of research at Erikson by phone, fax, or email. ■■

# Q&A

A I S H A R A Y , P H . D .

*Aisha Ray is a professor at Erikson Institute. Before coming to Erikson, Ray was a research scientist in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Chicago and on the faculty of the School of Education at DePaul University. As a researcher, her overarching interest is in how unmarried parents, particularly young adults living in low-income, high-risk communities, negotiate the tasks of childrearing. From this interest has come her research on the role of fathers in African-American communities and the development of children in multigenerational caregiving families in urban communities. Her research work with unmarried parents and their children began in the early 1980s at the University of Michigan, where she earned both an M.A. and a Ph.D. in developmental psychology. Ray has recently served as consultant for the Annie Casey Foundation, the National Center for Strategic Nonprofit Planning and Community Leadership, and the National Center on Fathers and Families at the University of Pennsylvania. Currently, she is engaged in consulting and writing for the Fathering Indicators Framework Working Group (see *Measuring Father Involvement*, p. 13), co-authoring a paper on father involvement in childcare with colleague Sydney Hans at the University of Chicago, and writing a research grant to evaluate efforts of early childhood programs to involve low-income fathers.*

**Q. What should childcare providers be doing to encourage and support fathers' involvement in the care of their young children?**

Childcare programs in poor communities have a particularly important role to play in fathers' involvement because, aside from child health clinics, they generally are the primary contact parents with young children have with early childhood professionals. Yet, despite the fact that programs such as Head Start and daycare have a large parent involvement component, child development programs generally have been ineffective in bringing fathers into programs. As a critical

service in communities, we're not doing very well in relation to fathers. Part of what's keeping fathers away is the nature of child development services, which traditionally have been female-dominated and focused on mothers and children. Fathers who want to be involved may often feel uninvited and unwelcome. This is especially true if parents are unmarried. Programs need to do more to recognize the important role fathers play in child development and to incorporate into parent involvement programming specific activities and strategies that will welcome and involve fathers—both custodial and non-custodial dads.

What would I recommend

community programs do to build significant involvement by fathers? First, the program needs to do a self-study to figure out what it has already been doing well in relation to parent involvement. Staff must determine whether their program strengths are in serving families generally or serving particular members of families, such as mothers. In the process of developing this self-study, programs have to determine what their realistic goals regarding fathers will be. Second, as part of the self-study, staff must also assess the community of families served by the program. Professionals who provide childcare, particularly at the grassroots level, know, for

example, in which families fathers and surrogate fathers are involved in children's lives. They're very aware of this because mothers often talk about their relationships with the kids' dads and surrogate dads. As a result, they already have a wealth of information about the households they serve. Thirdly, childcare staff have to begin talking to fathers and men within communities they serve. Usually programs have some fathers who are already involved—these men can serve as an important resource for thinking of programs and activities to involve other fathers. This is the hard part, because programs often lack resources, and the staff feel stressed and stretched. Regardless, programs have to begin to set aside the time, energy, and resources to bring fathers in and keep them there. There has to be a plan grounded in an understanding of the community—knowledge of the cultures of the community, community expectations of fathers, and what fathers do within families. This cannot be done in a naïve or romantic way. The relationships parents have, especially unmarried or divorced parents, can be complex, even problematic. But programs can and should work to help parents act together in the shared interests of their child's well-being.

For example, one strategy that programs have used successfully is to invite fathers in to join their kids at snack time for “Donuts with

Dad.” In communities, this invitation must be extended to both biological and surrogate fathers. Other programs have identified particular projects that they want men to do, with the idea that while they don't want to trap men in traditional gender roles, they do want to begin to build relationships so that fathers get involved in other aspects of work. In communities in which fathers are traditionally less involved in childcare, or less involved in going to school because it's really seen as the mother's role, fathers can be involved in other kinds of activities—fundraising activities, building activities, protection activities. There are lots of ways that fathers can become involved that are not necessarily caregiving activities, but which show that they are valued by programs.

However, it's not enough to have a Fathers' Night or any other type of father involvement activity unless there is follow-up. Without a plan to make sure that fathers stay involved, programs and fathers risk feeling defeated.

**Q. Past research on low-income fathers, particularly African-American fathers, has been widely criticized for its “deficit” framework. What is your view?**

The deficit framework tends to cast low-income fathers as absent, uninvolved, and problematic in their children's lives, thereby limiting the

adequate development of theory and research.

I think researchers ought to be asking a number of things about low-income fathers: Who are the dads? What are their demographic characteristics? How do they vary within a particular group and between groups? What kinds of involvement have they traditionally had with young children? And how do culture and contextual factors such as economic marginality influence involvement? What do fathers want for their children and for themselves as fathers? We must recognize that there is tremendous variability in this group of men who are labeled “low-income fathers.” They represent diverse cultural communities and traditions and different ends of the low-income spectrum. They are men who are very poor or working poor; men who are married, not married, divorced, or separated. And all of these factors have to be considered as research is undertaken.

For example, how are Puerto-Rican low-income fathers different from African-American low-income fathers? Do they have different values and beliefs about what a father is supposed to be? Do they act differently toward their young children and their partners? Is one more likely to marry than the other? The research is extremely important, partly to develop knowledge, but also because of the policy issues that are currently so central to the

discussion of low-income fathers. The lack of understanding of the dimensions of fathering in low-income communities contributes to policies that are ineffectual or even destructive to family life or fathers' involvement in children's development.

**Q. Are there aspects of fathering and father involvement itself that are not being researched but should be?**

Yes, many. I think one important issue is the definition of "father." When we look at fathering in America, we have to determine if we are discussing biological or surrogate fathers. One of the terms that researchers use to describe men who are not the biological father, but who have taken on the generative role of caring for kids, is "social father." And in all communities, including low-income communities, these men play an important role. So in looking at involvement, we must pay attention to the father's relationship status with the child.

Another important aspect we don't understand is why men father. What motivates them to be generative to children, either as social or biological fathers? And why are some men able to disengage from their children and remain disengaged? These are critical questions to understand because discussion at the policy level can get into a punitive mindset that attempts to force uninvolved or absent men to

be effective fathers, without considering why they have disengaged from their children. I think if we understood more about the array of factors—including psychological, social, and economic factors—that help men to be engaged fathers, we could design more effective policies.

For instance, in our work with families living in very poor communities in Chicago, we found that when children are very young, the majority of biological fathers are not only involved with them, but appear to be very personally invested in the role of being a father. In our study, fathers were young adult men, not adolescents, so we can assume that, for many of them, this was a normative developmental response to caring for and nurturing the next generation, in other words, a generative response. The question is, to what degree will these men be able to carry that generative role through the child's life? We know that economic factors influence fathering. Research indicates that paternal unemployment can set the stage for acute father-child and husband-wife conflict. Poor African-American fathers are more likely to be unemployed and to experience longer periods of unemployment than are poor Caucasian fathers. So, from a policy perspective, the issue is how to develop ways to help these fathers remain anchored to their children even when they are experiencing periods of unemployment.

**Q. How do you assess whether a program is effective at both engaging fathers and also bringing about a measure of change in their involvement with their children?**

In order to develop indicators to assess increased father participation in children's lives, we first must look at what the program is attempting to do and whether or not there are indicators that should be used by this program versus another program. Programs serving fathers have very different goals and agendas. A program like the Paternal Involvement Project, that is trying to help fathers reattach to their kids while providing employment, child support, and educational counseling, may require a different set of indicators to evaluate its effectiveness than would a childcare program that is trying to increase dads' classroom participation.

But there's a more complex question concerning the development of indicators of father involvement, that has to do with cultural, class, and ethnic diversity, all of which we know very little about in terms of fathers in the United States. The development of indicators for father involvement—just as the development of fathering programs—has to include indicators that reflect how communities define effective fathering and fathers' roles. If the community's cultural tradition sees diapering babies as an emasculating task, they will just find ways to

resist, as people have done for hundreds of years when institutions have tried to insist that they do something inconsistent with their lives. Still, I don't believe we give up and say that this community doesn't have any father involvement. What we must do is work to understand how the community defines father involvement and then use that measure in assessing program A versus program B.

I think what we can do as researchers at this point is to suggest to programs that they do have ways and means to think about these contextual issues. Then together we need to do the work to figure it out. That's one of the things that we're trying to accomplish with the Fathering Indicators Framework project: outlining questions surrounding cultural issues that programs must ask in terms of the community of families and fathers they're serving.

**Q. It seems the less we know the more important it is to tie programs very closely to the community being served. But the move in so many areas of social service is to establish statewide program outcomes. What do you think of this?**

With program accountability, there has to be a mechanism that allows programs to factor in the issues I've talked about. The issue of statewide outcomes is similar to policy at the federal level in terms of child

support enforcement. We have a one-size-fits-all child support enforcement plan, despite the fact that we know some low-income men are just not going to be able to make child support payments on a regular basis. We need to design enforcement policies and practices that

recognize particular problems of low-income men who want to provide, but who are unable to do so. In the same way, programs that serve families should have the leeway to define father involvement differently based upon the factors I've described.

—Interview conducted by  
Daria Zvetina

### Related Writings by Aisha Ray

- Hans, S. & Ray, A. (submitted for publication). *Low-Income African-American Fathers' Involvement in Caring for Toddlers*.
- Hans, S., Ray, A., Bernstein, V., & Halpern, R. (1995). *Caregiving in the Inner City*. A Final Report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. Chicago: University of Chicago, Department of Psychiatry, Unit for Research in Child Psychiatry and Development.
- Ray, A. & McLoyd, V. C. (1986). Fathers in Hard Times: The Impact of Unemployment and Poverty on Paternal and Marital Relations. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.) *The Father's Role: Applied Perspectives*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

# Community Focus

## THE PATERNAL INVOLVEMENT PROJECT

*Now in its ninth year, Chicago's Paternal Involvement Project offers parenting education, employment support, and legal advocacy to approximately 200 fathers per year. The project, which recently joined a major national initiative on fathering, is now gearing up to implement evaluation procedures that will measure program success on an on-going basis.*

The Paternal Involvement Project (PIP) was initiated in 1992 as a demonstration project funded through a public-private partnership of the Illinois Department of Human Services (IDHS) and foundations such as the Woods Foundation, Polk Bros. Foundation, and the McCormick Tribune Foundation. Its goal is to promote the involvement of noncustodial fathers in the lives of their children by addressing key barriers such as lack of employment and poor communication, and by raising fathers' awareness of the importance of their active presence in the lives of their children.

The project's Assistant Executive Director, Don Wadell, reports that PIP was recently selected as a site for the Partners for Fragile Families Project, a comprehensive national initiative aimed at expanding the availability of father involvement

programs and evaluating their effectiveness. A public-private partnership, the initiative is funded through a combination of federal and foundation monies, with technical assistance provided by the National Center for Nonprofit Strategic Planning and Community Leadership. The Chicago site for the demonstration project is a collaboration among PIP, the Chicago Jobs Council, the Noncustodial Parent Service Unit of IDHS, and DePaul University.

PIP annually serves approximately 200 noncustodial fathers who are predominantly African-American and low-income. The program has three main components—parenting sessions, job readiness and placement, and legal advocacy and education—which are provided within a case management framework.

### *Parenting Sessions Draw on Fathers' Experiences*

The parenting component consists of 12 weekly sessions covering topics such as child development, the importance of fathers as role models, communication, effective discipline, and the impact of neglect, abuse, and domestic violence on children. Waddell describes parenting sessions as very interactive and hands-on, drawing on the wealth of fathers' experiences. At the end of the three-month parenting component, each father receives a certificate of completion.

The job readiness component is a 30-day course that meets three times a week. It focuses on job preparation activities such as resume writing, job search, and interviewing, as well as stress management and employment retention strategies. The program also features a job bank and job club,

### More About PIP?

For more information about the Paternal Involvement Project, contact Don Waddell at Kennedy-King College, 6800 S. Wentworth Ave., Chicago, IL, 60621, Phone: 773/651-9262.

which assist fathers in obtaining and sustaining employment. The education component is provided through linkages to GED programs as well as skill-based vocational training programs.

In addition, PIP provides legal advocacy and education, as well as on-site paternity establishment. Waddell believes that the paternity establishment component has been highly successful, and notes that fathers frequently want to take responsibility for their children, but are intimidated by, or distrustful of, procedures in the court system. The program is also active within the public policy arena, advocating for the needs and rights of noncustodial fathers with legislators and others.

#### *First an Assessment, Then a Tailored Service Plan*

Fathers come to the program through a number of avenues, including word-of-mouth and walk-ins, referrals from community-based programs and juvenile or child support enforcement court, and program advertising and outreach efforts. When a father begins the

program, PIP staff conduct a comprehensive assessment of his needs, history of family involvement, and barriers to greater fathering involvement. They then develop a service plan that tailors support and resources and establishes goals and a timeline. While the program is most often completed in three months, Waddell notes that fathers frequently continue to participate in the project through the leadership and mentoring activities of its alumni program. The program's door is also always open to fathers who drop out prematurely or encounter additional challenges after leaving.

The program currently has a staff of eight—three administrators, two case managers, an outreach specialist, a family development coordinator, and an employment specialist. The size of the staff and the number of families being served will increase dramatically as the collaboration with the Partners for Fragile Families Project gets underway.

As is the case with most programs developed as part of the first wave of father involvement initiatives, documentation of program success is primarily anecdotal. Waddell is eager to put more systematic assessment mechanisms in place as he works with DePaul University, the institution responsible for evaluating his program under the Partners for Fragile Families Project.

When asked how fathers in the program were involved with their children, Waddell indicated that it

varies widely and includes men who have no involvement, those whose involvement is regulated through the court, those still in a relationship with the mother, and even a few fathers with sole custody. He noted that often when fathers enter the program they have equated involvement with financial support and express the view, "Why should I see my child when I have nothing to give?" In addition to supporting men in their efforts to contribute financially to their children, PIP works to broaden men's perceptions of themselves as fathers so that they recognize they have other things of value, such as time, to offer their children.

#### *Negative Public Opinion Creates Major Obstacle*

The greatest challenges for fathers in the program are the negative attitudes about noncustodial fathers that are embedded in public opinion, the social service arena, and current legislative policies. For example, Waddell noted, program fathers feel that the current child support enforcement system doesn't recognize the very real in-kind and financial contributions that fathers make to the care of their children—contributions they say they make as frequently as they are able. Fathers assert that they are not "deadbeat," but rather irregular in the support of their children. Additionally, fathers feel they receive short shrift within the court system: mothers but not

fathers are entitled to free legal counsel, and frequently support enforcement is not coupled with visitation.

Waddell observed that neither mediation nor counseling is routinely offered through the court, despite the fact that the low-income families desperately need these services. Fathers feel that the money that is garnered through enforcement goes primarily to offset state welfare costs rather than to benefit their children, and court determined

visitation arrangements, which frequently require supervision, often reduce the amount of time they actually see their children.

As a result, PIP has worked with the Noncustodial Parent Service Unit of IDHS to design policies and practices that are more responsive to the needs and realities of low-income fathers. The program has also begun to conduct awareness training with social work staff in other programs to identify attitudes and beliefs that act as barriers in

work with fathers. Waddell observed that to make real progress in the area of father involvement, we need to move beyond a definition of father based solely on residency and beyond one-size-fits-all policies that do not recognize and respond to the complexity of today's families. Only then, he feels, will parents be empowered to come together in the best interests of their children.

—Written by Daria Zvetina

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## Father Care

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the child's home.<sup>1</sup> This is not surprising, notes Erikson Institute Professor Aisha Ray, given that "paternal providing is at the center of American cultural constructs of fathering." Yet, financial provision and residence are benchmarks by which, demographic data suggest, low-income fathers are destined to fall short. Increasingly, Ray and other scholars argue against the use of such indicators for assessing fathers' involvement with, and commitment to, their children. Consequently, a small cadre of researchers has begun investigating

father involvement within a more holistic framework that incorporates the many ways fathers contribute to optimal child development, including economic providing and caregiving. As a result, aspects of father care such as fathers' involvement in caregiving activities and the quality of the father-child relationship are increasingly being explored.

At the same time, considerable legislative and programmatic effort is now being directed to support the investment of fathers—particularly low-income noncustodial fathers—in their children. Recognizing that

fathers have been excluded from many programmatic efforts directed at families, in 1995 President Clinton issued a memorandum to all executive branch offices and programs requesting that they develop father-friendly policies and strategies for involving fathers in programs.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the U.S. House of Representatives recently passed the Fathers Count Act of 1999, which, if passed by the Senate, will make millions of dollars available to develop and support fatherhood programs.

These initiatives reflect a growing

awareness among researchers, practitioners, and policy makers of the need to move beyond the narrow definition of father as “provider” to one that also encompasses the centrality of the father-child relationship. According to Ray, this is, in part, a response to evolving research demonstrating that fathers make a unique contribution to the development and well-being of children. “We know generally that there are both direct and indirect benefits to father involvement,” says Ray. “When fathers are consistently involved, children evidence greater sociability and better cognitive outcomes. They are also more likely to stay in school and less likely to become adolescent parents. Moreover, if the relationship between the mother and father is generally supportive and positive, the mother benefits from having a helpful partner and appears to be less stressed and, therefore, a more effective caregiver.”

### **Current Research Focuses on Financial Support and Contact**

A majority of the research on low-income fathers to date has been conducted on young African-American families and has focused on two aspects of fathers’ involvement: provision of financial support and frequency of contact with their children. Overall, these studies suggest that many low-income fathers are more involved with their

children than previously believed. For example, in a recent study of 133 low-income African-American families, Coley and Chase-Lansdale found that while only 12% of the fathers were living with their child by the time the child turned three, 53% were providing some type of financial assistance, and 57% visited their child at least once a month, with almost half of fathers visiting weekly or more often.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, in a study that analyzed data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Lerman found that the majority of nonresident African-American fathers visit their children regularly and almost half provide some level of financial support.<sup>4</sup>

However, the same study found lower rates of involvement among white and Hispanic fathers, raising questions about whether patterns of involvement vary as a function of ethnicity. Similar findings were also noted in an analysis of data gathered through the Urban Poverty and Family Life Survey of Chicago conducted in 1986 and 1987, which found that low-income African-American fathers were much more likely to visit their children daily than were white, Mexican, or Puerto-Rican fathers, and were least likely to never visit their children.<sup>5</sup>

Not surprisingly, the provision of economic support among nonresident fathers seems to be closely tied to their employment. For example, in a multi-ethnic study of female-headed families on welfare, Perloff

and Buckner found that only 28% of fathers provided some type of financial support; however, the rate of employment among fathers was only 43%.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Coley and Chase-Lansdale found that among their sample of low-income families in which 68% of fathers were employed, 57% of fathers were contributing financially (though only 12% were residing with their children).<sup>7</sup> Thus, fathers who are employed appear to be significantly more likely to provide financial support for their children. The provision of support also appears to be related to the frequency of fathers’ contact, with fathers who provide financial assistance having greater contact with their children.<sup>8</sup>

This relationship among employment, financial support, and fathers’ involvement with their children is a complicated one. For example, Coley and Chase-Lansdale found that fathers’ education and employment are strong predictors of both involvement with their children during the first year of life and maintenance of that involvement over time.<sup>9</sup> Yet, the authors note, it is unclear whether education and employment are proxies for responsibility and maturity or whether those fathers have greater access to their children because they are better able to provide economically.

In the Coley et al. study, involvement was measured as a composite index that included financial support, frequent contact, being re-

garded as a caretaker by the mother, and having some responsibility for, and emotional closeness to, the child. Fathers who were considered highly involved were characterized by three or more of these indices, with a majority characterized by all five, leading the researchers to hypothesize that nonresident fathers “bundle” their involvement, rarely demonstrating only one type. In the study, fathers who were employed at the time of the interview were six times more likely to have been highly involved at birth and when the child was three years old. Also, for those fathers who were initially uninvolved, employment was a significant predictor of increased involvement by age three, with employed fathers seven times more likely to have moved from low involvement to high involvement over the course of the child’s first three years.

With regard to the relationship between fathers’ residence and involvement, it is not surprising that fathers who are residing with their children are more likely to provide financial support and have the most frequent contact with their children.<sup>10</sup> This is a major finding across existing research, yet is not as simple as it first appears. Several recent studies suggest that the impact of residence upon fathers’ involvement is mediated by the quality of the relationship between the mother and father. These studies have found that, regardless of where

they are living, fathers are more likely to be involved with their children when they have a close relationship with the mother.<sup>11</sup>

### **Looking at the Quality of Care-Giving**

While this research helps to clarify some of the factors that influence involvement, it reveals little about the type and quality of care low-income fathers provide, or of their attitudes toward fatherhood. Of the limited research that has taken a more in-depth look at the caregiving practices of low-income fathers, most has done so with intact, though not necessarily married, families. According to Erikson Institute professor Aisha Ray, this is because the prevailing deficit model of low-income fathering casts nonresident fathers as absent, and therefore difficult to locate and engage in research.

While studies with intact families add to an understanding of the face of fathering in poor communities and suggest commonalities across income and culture, they do not shed light on those fathers of most concern to policy makers: low-income fathers living apart from their children. Few studies have specifically examined low-income fathers’ participation in caregiving with both resident and nonresident fathers. Such mixed samples are critical for developing an understanding of how fathers’ care varies according to presence in the home,

and about the nature of the time nonresident fathers spend with their children.

A more in-depth examination of the caregiving involvement of low-income, predominantly unmarried, fathers can be found in a study of inner-city caregiving on which Erikson’s Ray was a co-investigator.

### **A Window into Fathering in Chicago’s Grand Boulevard Community**

The Grand Boulevard community on Chicago’s South Side is home to some of the most distressed neighborhoods in the country, containing three of the nation’s poorest census tracts and several of its largest high-rise public housing developments. Neighborhoods have high rates of violent crime, unemployment, welfare dependence, school dropout, adolescent pregnancy, and infant mortality. Among African-American women in these and other poor inner-city communities in Chicago, the rate of nonmarital first births has been found to be as high as 72%.<sup>12</sup>

As part of a broader study of caregiving in the inner city, funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Charles Stewart Mott and Ford foundations, Erikson Institute professors Aisha Ray and Robert Halpern and their colleagues Sydney Hans and Victor Bernstein at the University of Chicago examined the role that low-income fathers in the Grand Boulevard area assumed

in the care of their toddlers. They interviewed 100 low-income African-American mothers with young toddlers about three facets of father involvement: fathers' participation in specific caregiving activities, availability of fathers and frequency of contact, and fathers' involvement in solo childcare. In addition, extensive interviews were conducted with a subsample of 17 fathers. These interviews focused on a range of topics, including the impact of becoming a father and perceptions about a father's role—what a father should do for his children and the mother of his children, what fathers actually do for their children, and whether they achieve their own standards of fatherhood.

Most families lived in public housing projects in the Grand Boulevard. On average, mothers were in their mid-20s, had three children, had not graduated from high school or married, and were currently receiving welfare benefits. Although only 10% of mothers were married, 39 fathers were living with the mother and toddler and were the mothers' partners, and an additional 21 were still partners with the mother but did not live with her. Thus, at the time of interview, 60% of mothers and fathers were in a committed relationship.

### Are Fathers Involved?

Mothers were asked to describe the degree to which fathers had been

involved in “raising, caring for, and/or supporting” their toddlers since birth and whether there had been any change in their level of involvement over time. Eighty-seven percent of mothers reported that the fathers had been somewhat to highly involved with their children, and the vast majority (95%) of these mothers described fathers and toddlers as “very strongly attached” or “attached” to one another. Thus, only 13% of fathers had been truly “absent” from the time the child was born. According to mothers, the reasons for this lack of involvement included inability or unwillingness to act as a provider, breakup of the romantic relationship, or denial of paternity.

### Are Fathers Primary Caregivers?

When asked to identify up to four adults they considered to be primary caregivers for the toddler and others they felt were important in helping to raise the child, 59% of mothers identified the father as either a primary caregiver or as performing an important role in raising the child. In fact, fathers were second only to mothers as primary caregivers, and were the most common figures identified as helping to raise toddlers. These findings are similar to those of other studies of low-income fathers, in which fathers are identified as the second most common caregiver or

the second most frequent resource in a child's support network.<sup>13</sup> In terms of cooperating with mothers in caregiving, 66% of mothers indicated that they and the father regularly discussed the needs and care of the toddler.

### Do Fathers Perform Caregiving Tasks?

Mothers were also asked to identify individuals who performed 12 routine caregiving tasks falling into five developmental domains: physical, cognitive, language, emotional, and social. These tasks included activities such as meal preparation, toilet training, reading or telling stories, teaching right from wrong, talking and explaining things, comforting, playing, disciplining, and protecting the toddler from environmental harm.

According to mothers, eight of the twelve caregiving tasks were performed by 33% or more of fathers. Fathers were most frequently involved in protecting toddlers from harm, teaching them right from wrong, and disciplining them, with almost half of fathers performing these tasks. Additionally, over 40% of fathers were involved in comforting, holding, and talking to their toddlers. Thirty-three percent of fathers played with toddlers. Two-thirds of mothers said play was what fathers did best. The identification of play as the most frequently cited activity that fathers did well is consistent with other research that

## Measuring Father Involvement

In 1998, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) at the University of Pennsylvania convened a group of leading researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, including Erikson Institute professor Aisha Ray, to identify mechanisms for assessing changes in fathers' attitudes and behaviors toward their children and the impact of these changes on children, families, and communities.

Through this Working Group on Fathering Indicators, a Fathering Indicators Framework has been developed that identifies key indicators of fathering and qualitative and quantitative research methodologies for their assessment. The goal is to

aid programs, researchers, and policymakers in evaluative efforts to enhance father involvement and the effect of these efforts on children's well-being.

To date, the group has identified six indicators of father involvement: father presence; caregiving; socialization, cognition, and academic achievement; co-parenting; fathers' well-being; and contributions. The group has also outlined strategies for assessing change in these indicators. Participants will soon begin to validate and refine this Fathering Indicators Framework through a series of focus groups with practitioners that will be conducted nationally.

This effort promises to broaden our understanding of fathering and the effectiveness of strategies to strengthen it. However, as Ray notes in her interview, caution must be

taken to ensure that we build a knowledge base about fathers that considers the complex role contextual factors such as culture, race, class, sexual preference, and ethnicity play in father involvement with children and families.

A formal report on the Fathering Indicators Framework will be available later this year. For further information contact:

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has found fathers to be more likely to engage in play than caregiving activities.<sup>14</sup>

As expected, fathers who were most involved in caregiving tasks were living with the mother and toddler at the time of the interview. Fifty percent or more of resident fathers performed 11 of the 12 caregiving activities. In contrast, only five caregiving tasks were performed

by 40% or more of the nonresident fathers who were still in a relationship with the mother. Fathers who were no longer partners of the mother were reported to be largely uninvolved in caregiving tasks.

### Do Fathers Spend Time With Their Toddlers?

Overall, more than 75% of fathers saw their child on a daily to monthly

basis and 48% of the fathers had daily contact with their toddlers. As with the performance of caregiving activities, fathers' residential status affected the frequency of their contact with their toddlers. Close to 100% of fathers who were living with the toddler saw the toddler daily as compared to 40% of those who were not living with the family, but were still partners of the mother.

## National Research Studies in Progress

The following are large-scale multi-site projects that will yield significant data on the characteristics and involvement of unmarried, low-income fathers, as well as child outcomes:

- **The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Project** is a 20-city longitudinal study that is examining nonmarital childbearing, welfare reform, and the role of fathers in 4,500 low-income families ([www.columbia.edu/cu/ssw/grants/indivproj/garf2.html](http://www.columbia.edu/cu/ssw/grants/indivproj/garf2.html)).
- **The Early Head Start Research Evaluation Project—Early Head Start Fathers' Studies** are a series of studies on low-income fathers that are part of a 17-site evaluation of Early Head Start programs (<http://38.150.5.70/headstar.htm>).
- **Welfare, Children, and Families: A Three-City Study** is being conducted in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio to examine the effects of welfare reform on children and families over time. As part of the study, fathers are being interviewed to provide demographic information and information on parenting practices, paternal identity, and other related issues ([www.jhu.edu/~welfare/](http://www.jhu.edu/~welfare/)).

An additional 40% of fathers who were still partners but were not living in the home saw their children once or more each week. Thus, a full 80% of fathers who were not living with the child but were still involved with the mother saw their child on a daily to weekly basis. The frequency of contact was dramatically different for fathers who were no longer involved with the mother. Twenty-five percent of these fathers saw their children on a daily or weekly basis, slightly less than this saw them one to two times a month, and the majority saw them less than once a month or never.

### Do Fathers Provide Economic Support?

One of the most interesting findings to emerge from the study concerns the provision of economic support. Despite the fact that only 52% of all fathers had worked in the past two

years, 69% contributed some form of financial assistance to the family. The rates of both employment and financial provision were highest for those fathers who were not cohabitating, but were still involved with the mother. Although only 35% of fathers who were no longer involved with the mother were employed, over 62% of them managed to provide some measure of economic support.

Mothers reported that 66% of fathers were reliable providers of financial and material support. When asked how satisfied they were with the father's overall performance in his fathering role, a strong relationship emerged between mothers' satisfaction and fathers' provider behaviors. In fact, mothers' satisfaction with fathers' performance was more strongly related to the fulfillment of the provider roles.

According to Ray, the issue of

fathers' providership is critical to their sustained involvement. She notes, across social class, men consider providing as one of the key responsibilities of fatherhood and thus it is very important to their identity. In addition, economic providing is central to societal expectations regarding fathers.

"Men want to be providers for their children," Ray says. "When a father is unable to provide, I think he feels tremendous pressure from himself, his partner or the mother of his children, and from his own kin network and her kin network. He feels that he isn't doing an adequate job as a father and as a man. Low-income fathers are caught between expectations that they be good providers and structural factors that keep them from being able to do so consistently. What we found in our study is that mothers valued both the fathers' caregiving contribution to

## Listening to the Voices of Fathers

To inform the practice of the Ounce of Prevention Fund Early Head Start Program in the Grand Boulevard community, Erikson Institute Professors Linda Gilkerson and Fran Stott, in partnership with Ounce of Prevention staff, recently completed a series of in-depth focus groups with program family members. A total of 21 focus groups were held, seven each with mothers, grandmothers, and fathers and grandfathers. These sessions explored the meaning of parenthood within this community, the support and stresses family members experience in their parenting efforts, the parents' child-rearing goals and strategies, and the way in which Early Head Start could help.

A group of eight fathers and grandfathers participated in the men's series, which concluded in July of this year. Although the formal analysis of data has yet to be completed, Gilkerson and Stott, with the assistance of Aisha Ray and two graduate students, note that a number of themes were clearly evident. The fathers and grandfathers described a deep commitment to their children, including those fathers who were not married to the mother or living with their children. They voiced a strong resolve to be involved in their children's lives and to prevent another generation of fatherless children. Group members attributed the growth in fathers' involvement to an increased expectation from friends (even gang members), the Million Man March, the media, and changes in popular culture as a whole. The most stressful aspect of caregiving for the young fathers was having access to their children controlled by others—the children's mother, grandmother, or the mother's boyfriend. Most interesting and encouraging was the intergenerational support observed between fathers and grandfathers in the group. They provided ideas about how Early Head Start could reach out to fathers, including continuing the group launched by the research project.

the toddler and they valued his economic providing. But they simply valued the economic providing more.”

### Fathers' Perspectives about Fathering

As part of the study, 17 fathers were interviewed. Not surprisingly, all of the men who agreed to be interviewed were either living with or still involved with the mother. Thus, they represent a sample of highly involved fathers. Fathers were asked to discuss a variety of issues, including their involvement in caregiving, their attitudes and beliefs about parenting, and the role of fathers.

When asked how being a father had changed their lives, the men overwhelmingly described changes for the better. The majority indicated that fatherhood had grounded them somehow—by making them more responsible and mature, altering a negative lifestyle, helping them avoid crime and prison, and raising their aspirations. More than half described learning to put the needs and interests of their child above their own. As one father described it “I'm committed. I realize what it's like to be grown, responsible. You have to make sure your child eats. You can go to bed hungry, but he'll eat.” Almost a third noted increases in

their self-esteem or pride gained from their ability to care for their children. “They are about the sweetest, greatest thing that's happened to me,” another father explained.

When asked what a father should do for his children, all fathers described the importance of “being there” for their children—providing understanding and emotional support, being engaged, available, and emotionally committed—in short, building a close relationship with their children. Over half of the fathers also described the importance of providing discipline and moral guidance—setting limits,

### For More Information

**National Center on Fathers and Families –**

[www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu](http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu)

**Joint Center on Poverty Research –**

[www.jcpr.org/newsletters/vol4\\_no2/](http://www.jcpr.org/newsletters/vol4_no2/)

**Child Trends –** [www.childtrends.org](http://www.childtrends.org)

**Welfare Information Network: Fatherhood –** [www.welfareinfo.org](http://www.welfareinfo.org)

**Families and Work Institute –** [www.fatherhoodproject.org](http://www.fatherhoodproject.org)

acting as a role model, and teaching right from wrong. Almost a third identified fathering responsibilities related to providing financial support, demonstrating love and affection, and participating in their children's education.

Fathers were also asked about the most important things they actually do for their toddlers. Consistent with men's views on what fathers *should* do for their children, the most frequently reported types of actual involvement were being there for the child as an emotionally supportive and committed parent, teaching them things and being involved in their education, basic caregiving and health maintenance activities, discipline and moral guidance, expressing affection and love, and protecting the toddler from harm. These types of involvements align with mothers' descriptions of the kinds of caregiving activities fathers most frequently provided.

When asked how they might fall short of their "ideal" father, approximately one-third indicated that they lived up to their standards of fatherhood. Of the two-thirds who didn't,

64% were most disappointed by their inability to provide adequately for their family, and over a third felt they spent too little time with the children they had fathered from previous relationships.

Finally, fathers were asked to describe the most important things they felt they should provide to the mother of their toddler. Here fathers most frequently cited the importance of providing financial support. Second to financial provision were being available to support the mother emotionally and assisting her with child rearing, both of which were reported by 41% of men. Interestingly, fathers most frequently identified financial provision as the most important responsibility of a nonresident father.

### Summary

The research of Ray et al. and other investigators controverts existing stereotypes of low-income fathers and demonstrates that a majority of low-income fathers are present and involved in the lives of their young children. In the Grand Boulevard study, despite the fact that only 10%

of mothers and fathers were married, three out of four fathers were actively engaged in the care of their toddlers. Almost two-thirds saw their toddler daily to weekly, almost half regularly engaged in solo care of their toddlers, and the majority was routinely involved in caregiving tasks. While contact and involvement in caregiving was significantly less for nonresident fathers who were no longer romantically involved with the mother, even within this group there was a small cadre of fathers who were very active in the rearing of their children.

This research on low-income fathers is encouraging. However, it also sounds a cautionary note. Two aspects of the research cited in this report—the relationship between fathers' involvement and their employment status and their relationship with the mother—raise significant questions about the sustainability of that involvement over time. Also, as Ray points out in her interview, presently we know little about the influence of culture on low-income fathering. The development of policies and programs that effectively support responsible fathering in diverse low-income communities hinges upon our ability to understand and respond to societal barriers and cultural variations in father care.

## About the Author

*Daria Zvetina is a Chicago-based research and community planning consultant specializing in programs for at-risk children and families and the homeless. Zvetina, who has a master's of education in educational psychology, has conducted research on Chicago's inner-city schools through Erikson Institute's Schools Project.*

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## NEWS FROM THE HERR RESEARCH CENTER

# New Doctoral Students

Four new doctoral students have joined Erikson Institute's doctoral program. **Jean Robbins** (M.B.A., Columbia University; B.A., psychology, Smith College) is currently a grantee administrator at the Ounce of Prevention Fund Educare Center. Jean has also been an administrator in the Chicago Public Schools Office of Special Projects. Among the programs she established was Joy Junkets, which focuses on visual arts to teach developmentally disabled school-age children and adults. **Kerstin Schmidt** (M.A., early childhood, Pacific Oaks College; B.A., linguistics, University of Chicago) has been a nursery teacher for the past nine years, and most recently taught at Park West Cooperative Nursery School in Chicago. **Suzanne Steinrueck** (M.A., B.S.N./R.N., Boston University; M.Ed., Erikson Institute/Loyola University Chicago) has worked in health education for over 15 years. She most recently was an early intervention administrator and nurse educator at Esperanza Community Services, a program for special needs children. Steinrueck has been awarded an Erikson doctoral fellowship for applied research in infancy. **Constance VanBrunt** (M.A. in teaching, Harvard University; B.A. with child development specialization, Sarah Lawrence College) is executive director of CYCLEWiz Factory of Learning, a youth program that promotes creativity and academic achievement. VanBrunt, who was the founding editor of *Ebony Jr!* magazine, has been awarded an Erikson doctoral fellowship for applied research in child development.

# Research Update

The overarching goals of most early childhood intervention programs are to optimize children's development and learning and to support parents' ability to promote that development. Research on these programs has been mainly focused on outcomes. Now, Professor **Jon Korfmacher** has begun to examine a largely unstudied feature of early intervention: the *quality* of the helping relationship between service provider and parent.

He is asking: What is a helping relationship? What are its components and how can they be measured? How does a service provider's perspective on helping relationships differ from that of the families he or she serves? How does the quality of that relationship contribute to program outcomes? Korfmacher currently is engaged in research with two community-based initiatives: Cradle to Classroom, a home visiting program for teen moms and their infants sponsored by the Chicago Public Schools (with funding from the Spencer Foundation); and the Chicago Doula Project, a support program for pregnant teens, in collaboration with Sydney Hans at the University of Chicago Department of Psychiatry (funding in part from Irving B. Harris). Korfmacher is focusing on a small number of carefully selected cases and examining them in depth, using a multi-trait, multi-method evaluation plan.

Professors **Jie-Qi Chen** and **Gillian McNamee** and doctoral students **Ann Masur** and **Jennifer McCray** are currently engaged in a two-year project focused on

classroom teaching. Funded by the Educational Foundation of America, the project aims to develop a child assessment instrument that will help student teachers strengthen the important connection between curriculum planning and what they know about how children learn. The research team has developed the assessment instrument and will work this fall with approximately 40 student teachers in Erikson's graduate and undergraduate programs to pilot the instrument and collect data on children in preschool, kindergarten, and primary classrooms. The assessment activities are curriculum activities using common classroom materials. However, the activities are specifically designed to identify key cognitive and interpersonal strengths of young children in academic as well as non-traditional domains such as movement, music, and social understanding. It is knowledge about what, as well as how, young children learn that the project seeks to identify.

**Jie-Qi Chen** is also teaming with Senior Research Advisor **Charles Chang** in a two-year project to develop

and implement a computer training program for early childhood educators. The project, funded by the Polk Bros. Foundation, is being conducted in cooperation with the Chicago Public Schools and specifically targets Head Start programs in poor neighborhoods where teachers and students often are less prepared to use current technology. The project will examine the impact of its year-long training on the knowledge, attitudes, and practice of participant teachers with regard to using computer technology with children.

**Chen**, Adjunct Faculty member **Patty Horsch** (doctoral class of '99), and **Marie Donovan**, professor of early childhood education at DePaul University (and former program associate at Erikson), are lead writers on a book describing Erikson's School's Project, a decade-long partnership with the Chicago Public Schools that focused on developmentally appropriate practices to optimize learning for public school children. The book reports on Erikson's long-term work with nine public schools and takes a careful look at responsive

collaboration and the lessons to be learned about building effective school-university partnerships.

Professor **Linda Gilkerson** is collaborating with pediatrician **Ann Cutler, M.D.**, from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and with Erikson doctoral student **Cynthia Lashley** in a project designed to discover the gaps in services

for infants and toddlers with disabilities or delays in the state of Illinois. The areas of potential unmet service needs being examined are: developmental screening and referral, childcare, and infant mental health services. With the help of Senior Research Advisor **Charles Chang** they are currently involved in the data analysis phase of the project.

Their findings will then be reviewed by a state-wide coalition which will make policy recommendations to state agencies, the legislature, and advocacy groups to address the gaps in needs for families with infants and toddlers with disabilities or delays. ■■

#### **Applied Research in Child Development**

*A semi-annual publication from the Herr Research Center at Erikson Institute, 420 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago, IL. 60611-5627. Ph. 312/755-2250; Fax 312/755-2255. Funded in part by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs, Springfield, IL.*

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