



Social Work Strategies for Sustaining Paternal Involvement among Unwed Fathers: Insights from Field Research

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Social Work Strategies for Sustaining Paternal Involvement among Unwed Fathers: Insights from Field Research

Waldo E. Johnson, Jr., PhD, MSW

Introduction

The promotion of marriage among unwed parents is central to the Bush Administration's strategy for the reauthorization of the welfare reform bill. Though loosely based on social science research findings, this strategy is firmly rooted in moral values and traditional notions about family formation and structure. Social science research suggests that married adults are more productive on the job, earn and save more money, have better physical and mental health, and live longer (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Economic security and improved health outcomes have important implications for the well-being of children.

The unwed parents targeted by this strategy are unlikely to possess the individual characteristics that yield these heralded benefits of marriage. The moral imperative for marriage among unwed parents emerges in an era of declining national and international marriage rates, and steadily increasing rates of cohabitation, delayed marriage, and single lifestyles (Coontz, 2002). Clearly, this is a downward trend, and underlies a much more complex problem.

The Administration's strategy presumes that all unwed couples are uncommitted as partners because they have not taken "a walk down the aisle." Unwed fathers in couple relationships are assailed as "irresponsible." A recent analysis of the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study (FFCWS)¹ found that one-half of unwed parents are cohabiting at the time of their children's births, and that another third are romantically involved, but not residing together (Johnson, 2001a). These findings suggest that a strategy designed to encourage responsible parenthood and the formation and maintenance of healthy two-parent married families

might be achieved by employing a traditional social work value. This value entails starting with clients "where they are at" to better understand the current couple relationship. This article recommends social work strategies for developing pro-family strategies that increase and sustain paternal involvement among unwed parents by focusing on key dimensions of the couple relationship. The author examines in-depth interviews with unwed fathers and mothers conducted at six-week and three-month intervals following the focal child's birth.

The nature of couple relationships among unwed parents remains largely unexamined by researchers. The relatively small number of available studies has tended to examine these relationships in a narrow manner. The dimensions and functions of the couple relationship among married parents typically form the baseline for assessment of unmarried couple relationships. Variables, such as the unwed father's commitment as a parent, are largely assessed in terms of the father's acknowledgement of paternity, residential status, and financial contributions to his family of procreation. These examinations suggest that couple relationships among unwed parents tend to be less stable, often resulting in decreasing father involvement. The latter outcome has been associated with several developmental problems affecting child well-being, including poor self-esteem and lower levels of intellectual functioning (Lamb, 1997; Marsiglio & Cohan, 1997; Crockett, Eggebeen, & Hawkins, 1993).

While these are important indicators of child and family well-being, as well as paternal commitment, independently, they are insufficient for understanding the context of current and future paternal commitment, or more broadly, the nature and developmental trajectories of couple relation-

¹ The Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study is a national longitudinal study that follows a birth cohort of (mostly) unmarried parents and their children, providing new information about the capabilities and relationships of unwed parents, the well-being of their children, and the role of public policy in family formation

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ships among unwed parents. The couple relationship could be a significant indicator for helping unwed parents to think and act more strategically about family formation and development. It could also be informative in understanding parental expectations and obligations, patterns of negotiation and behavior, and future development.

Paternal Involvement among Unwed Fathers via the Couple Relationships: A Review of the Research Literature

More than half of the children in the United States now spend part of their childhood in single-parent families, and similar trends are evident in other industrialized countries. Fatherlessness is particularly marked in impoverished African American communities, and considerable concern has been expressed about its effects on mothers and children in these families (Lamb, 1997). More than half of the births among poor, unwed parents are unintended, and the parents, especially young fathers, are simply unprepared to assume the responsibilities that would produce the kind of marriages that increase child well-being (Mincy, 2002).

Young men often envision fatherhood and their involvement with their children in normative ways; however, as unwed parents, their paternal identities are compromised and stifled (Marsiglio, Hutchinson, & Cohan, 2000; Johnson, 1995). The degree to which unwed fathers are able to be involved with their children is affected by a number of factors, including the father's age, education, race and ethnicity; couple relationship status; paternal and maternal families of origin; the father's ability and provision of financial support; and the father's spiritual identity (Johnson, 2001a, 2001b; Johnson, Levine, & Doolittle, 1999; Parke, 1996; Cevera, 1991).

Moreover, a father's residential arrangement with his child has the most significant impact on the quantity and quality of paternal involvement (Johnson, 1998; Perkins & Davis, 1996). Lessened involvement is exacerbated when the nonresident

parent does not have legal custodial/visitation rights. In such cases, fathers are dependent upon the custodial parent to extend visitation and custodial rights, and to cooperate with factors like changing work schedules and other commitments, in order to sustain parental involvement.

There is a great need to assess the strength of these otherwise fragile agreements in terms of the couple's relationship status (Johnson, 2001a). Unwed couples residing together at the time of their child's birth can provide researchers with a better understanding of the dynamics involved in the maintenance and dissolution of the couple relationship. Clearly, when parents reside together, the unwed father sees his child more frequently and the range of paternal involvement is likely to increase. Further, with proper support, cohabiting relationships might evolve into more stable ones.

While recent studies of paternal involvement reflect its breadth and dynamics (Coley, 2001; Johnson, Levine, & Doolittle, 1999; Roy, 1999), limited research has focused on the couple relationship as a facilitator of paternal involvement. Johnson (2001a) found that paternal involvement among unwed parents was especially sensitive to the couple's relationship status. In this study, paternal involvement was measured by the father's: (1) Provision of financial support during the pregnancy; (2) Provision of non-financial support, like helping with chores during the pregnancy; and (3) Number of visits to the hospital following birth. These data support the findings of earlier research studies, in which the couple relationship between the unwed parents was determined to be a critical factor in predicting future paternal involvement (Cochran, 1997; Miller, 1994; Florsheim, Moore, & Suth, 1997; Danziger & Radin, 1990; Marsiglio, 1989; Lamb & Elster, 1986; Westney, Cole, & Munford, 1986; Hendricks & Montgomery, 1983; Hendricks, Howard, & Caesar, 1981).

There is a body of research indicating that paternal involvement among unwed parents declines within the first few years following birth (Garfinkel,

McLanahan, Tienda, & Brooks-Gunn, 2001). Levine-Coley and Chase-Lansdale (2000) reported varying degrees of involvement among residential and nonresidential unwed fathers in the Multigenerational Family Study at different points in time over the first three years of their children's lives. Their findings highlight the importance of intervention and supportive services in seeking to increase and maintain father involvement in the first years of their children's lives. Wilson (2002), citing the earlier work of Anderson (1999), contends that the father's "non-commitment" is part and parcel to the escalation of unwed parenthood. Building and sustaining healthy couple relationships among unwed parents also increases the range and level of paternal involvement.

Intervention services aimed at increasing paternal involvement among unwed fathers suggest that these men are in need of assistance that secures their employment opportunities, enhances their knowledge and understanding of child development, and builds their skills in negotiating intimate and co-parenting relationships (Kiselica, 1995; McLaughlin, 1995; Lerman, 1993; Barth, Claycoomb, & Loomis, 1988; Anderson-Smith, 1986; Allen-Meaers, 1984; Leashore, 1981). These economic and non-economic supports not only enhance the role performance of unwed fathers, but they increase the fathers' attractiveness as partners and mates in couple and co-parenting relationships.

Sample Data and Methods of Collection and Analysis

The in-depth, qualitative interviews are drawn from Time, Love, Cash, Care and Children (TLC3): A Qualitative Study of Child Well-being and Family Dynamics in Families with Young Children. The study was designed to examine why some couples with very young children break up, while others remain together; why some fathers remain actively involved as parents, while others do not; and how initial couple and parenthood dynamics affect the child's development. The interviews were

conducted with a sub-sample of 75 couples, in three of the twenty-city sample that comprise the FFCWS. While the FFCWS contains couples with a range of incomes, and a smaller comparative sample of married couples, the overwhelming majority of the sample is comprised of low-income, unmarried parents.

The TLC3 interviews were conducted with unwed parent couples in Chicago, Milwaukee, and New York City at three interval stages: when the focal child was six-weeks, three-months, and one-year old. This method provided in-depth, observational data on the quality of the unwed couples' parenting relationships. A male and female interviewing team conducted the six-week in-depth interview with both parents present. The interviewing team split up into gender-specific pairs to conduct the three-month interviews.

The in-home interviews were audio-taped and professionally transcribed. They varied in length from 1.5 to 2.25 hours. Each parent was paid a small honorarium for his/her time and contribution to the overall study. An interview guide was used to conduct all interviews. The interview guide focused on several dimensions of parental roles within the couple relationship, namely, negotiation and the struck bargain. This is a concept found in economic studies of marriage, which purports that married couples negotiate and bargain with one another around critical issues like finances, childcare, household chores, and other responsibilities. The guide also focused on: (1) Caregiver roles, both primary and non-primary; (2) Who performs certain duties (and what percentage of time) for the child and around the house; (3) Time spent together as a couple; (4) Time for oneself; (5) Time spent with the baby; (6) Disagreements regarding money; (7) Emotional skills and caring; (8) Individual parenting history, including ideal roles and behaviors versus actual roles and behaviors; and (9) Income and expenditures.

The analytical framework initially entailed reviewing each couple interview transcript for a baseline demographic assessment of the couple sta-

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tus. A couple evaluation instrument was developed to assess each couple's relationship on ten key dimensions at the six-week, three-month, and one-year intervals. The assessment tool also included field notes, such as nonverbal and observational information recorded by the interviewer and any other pertinent information taken from the baseline surveys with both parents. The six-week couple interview provided an overview of the dynamics of the couple relationship and parenting situation. It also provided information on future goals reported by mothers and fathers together about the couple and parenting relationships. The three-month individual interview provided insight on progress toward reaching couple and parenting goals, changes in timelines, etc. A comparative review of couple versus individual (six-week interview versus three-month interview) reports was completed to identify strengths and weaknesses in the couple relationships and their effects on the parenting relationships, and vice versa.

The present analysis is comprised of in-depth interviews conducted with Chicago's four couples at the six-week and three-month data collection intervals. The analysis was restricted to the Chicago sub-sample because the author conducted the couples' six-week and the fathers' three-month in-depth interviews, as well as the fathers' baseline hospital survey interviews in Chicago. The table below provides some demographic data for the four Chicago couples interviewed in this study.

In-depth Interview Findings

Findings from the in-depth interviews have been used to identify eleven dimensions of the couple relationship: (1) the relationship's current status, (2) the father's ability to provide financial support, (3) care-giving roles among parents, (4) engagement in household chores, (5) couple time, (6) individual time, (7) disagreements over money, (8) bargaining, (9) emotional skills and caring, (10) the parents' history of parenting, and (11) perspectives about

Couple	Relationship Status	Duration (Years)	Residential Status	Children Together	Other Children	Age	Education (Years)	Employment Status
<i>Ames:</i> Bill Mary	Romantic	6	Cohabit	3	0	34 31	<12 <12	Unemployed Unemployed
<i>Brown:</i> Jason Lynn	Romantic	1	Cohabit	1	0	28 27	Some College Some College	Office Manager Secretary
<i>Carter:</i> Terry Carol	Romantic	2	Cohabit	1	1 1	31 29	12 12	Bus Driver Unemployed
<i>Davis:</i> Eddie Karen	Estranged	2	Live apart	1	3 0	30 26	<12 <12	Unemployed Part-time Sales Clerk

gender norms regarding appropriate parenting roles. These dimensions are examined below, with a specific focus on paternal involvement.

Current Status of the Couple Relationship

The duration of the couple relationship for the unwed parents under examination ranged from two to five years. At six weeks, the Ames, Browns, and Carters were cohabiting. The Davis couple was no longer romantically involved because of the father's problem behaviors (drug use and trafficking) and infidelity.

At the three-month interval, the three couples were still romantically involved, though Mr. Brown raised concern about the future of the couple's romantic status. He reported that he lived in constant fear that his partner would take the baby away (as she had threatened to do on several occasions) and deny his visitation or involvement. He contended that he had asked her to marry him, both prior to and since the baby's birth, but she has refused to give him a definitive response.

Father's Ability to Provide Financial Support

At six weeks, Mr. Brown and Mr. Carter were employed full-time in the formal economy, as an office manager in a national membership organization and a municipal transit bus driver respectively. Mr. Ames had been laid-off from his long-standing job as a carpet layer. Mr. Davis did not report any previous work experience in the formal workforce, and appeared to be involved in drug trafficking, for which he had been previously incarcerated. Mr. Davis's daily patterns suggested some type of involvement in the underground economy.

Ms. Davis was enrolled in school and working part-time in a fast food establishment. Ms. Brown was employed as a secretary, and the remaining two mothers were unemployed. These statuses remained unchanged at the three-month interval.

Caregiver Roles

At six weeks, Mr. Ames, Mr. Brown, and Mr. Carter were engaged in limited care giving roles for their babies. While several of the fathers expressed uncertainty about caring for children so small, their

limited involvement in providing care for their babies was primarily the result of their partners' reluctance to relinquish the children to them. With the exception of Ms. Ames, the mothers expressed reservations about relinquishing the care of their babies to others—even their own mothers and grandmothers—because their babies were so young.

Mothers were more likely than fathers to get up for 3:00 a.m. feedings and diaper changes. Both of the employed fathers felt that this arrangement was reasonable, given that they worked full-time jobs and were willing to help out when they returned home.

At three months, all fathers were more engaged in care giving. Mr. Ames shared care giving with his partner halftime; Mr. Brown and Mr. Carter shared in care giving, but the amount of time varied from five to thirty-five percent. Mothers continued to raise concerns about the fathers' unwillingness to get up for early morning feedings, but reported that fathers had increased involvement in changing and bathing their children. Mr. Davis was granted visitation by his child's mother, despite some of her family members' objections.

Household Chores

At six weeks, all fathers reported that they were engaged in household chores, enabling their partners to get bed rest. The mothers, with one exception (Ms. Ames), reported that the fathers provided less help with household chores than the fathers reported.

At three months, three fathers reported that they helped with household chores. Mothers generally agreed that the fathers' engagement with household chores had increased since the six-week interview, but this engagement was still not optimal. Mothers typically raised concerns about the trade-offs the fathers made with regard to household chores; when the fathers increased their involvement in providing care, their involvement with household chores lessened, and vice versa. Mothers generally felt that they did not have the luxury to make trade-offs, and had to embrace the increases of workload in both domains.

Time Spent Together as a Couple

At six weeks, none of the three romantically involved couples had spent any time together alone as a couple. The Ames and the Carters had other children in the household in addition to the focal child. The Davis couple, although estranged, reported spending some time together trying to salvage their relationship.

At three months, only the Ames and the Carters had spent some time together alone as a couple. Mr. Brown expressed grave concern about his relationship with his partner; following his repeated efforts, and those of his partner's family, to allow the couple some time together, the mother flatly refused to allow others (even trusted family members) to care for the baby for even an hour. The Davis couple had decided to sever their relationship.

Time Spent Alone or Pursuing Personal Interests

At six weeks, all fathers reported having spent some time alone or with friends. Mr. Carter reported that his wife did not like how he often spent his "down time," and that this had become a source of conflict. Ms. Brown reported that she had no time for herself.

At three months, the fathers again reported having spent some time alone or with friends, but Mr. Brown and Mr. Carter reported having less time to pursue personal interests. All mothers reported having some time to spend alone or with friends.

Disagreements about Money

At six weeks, the Davis couple reported frequent disagreements over money. Mr. Davis contended that his partner's mother instigated these disagreements. His partner simply retorted that she needed more financial help with the baby. In general, the Browns and Carters expressed concern about their limited financial resources to support their babies, as the costs related to care continuously escalated. Sometimes these disagreements focused on the lack of sufficient money, at other times, these disagreements centered on how to best budget and manage their limited incomes and resources.

The Ames, both unemployed, expressed concern about having sufficient funds to feed both their baby and two older children. While Mr. Ames generally deferred to his partner regarding the household budget, both reported some disagreements over how money should be spent. The Browns, both employed with white-collar jobs, also reported similar disagreements over the household budget, because their expenses related to childcare, rent, transportation, food, and clothing continued to soar. They felt that their "middle class" income was stretched beyond measure, and the increasing demands on this income had become an evolving source of conflict.

At three months, disagreements over money had ceased to be a concern for the Davis couple. The couple abandoned hopes of salvaging their relationship, and the mother gave the father far less room for negotiation around the provision of financial support for the baby. Reluctantly, Mr. Davis accepted her demands, though there was some discrepancy about the promptness of its receipt. The remaining couples reported increased concern over their respective financial statuses in the three-month interview. Consistent themes surrounding disagreements over money included the rising costs of food and clothing for the babies and dwindling family income.

Negotiating or Bargaining Skills

At six weeks, the Davis couple bargained around the boundaries of their future relationship. Divergent family dynamics, emerging from the mother's family, were at play: her mother did not want the father to be involved with the family at all, while her grandmother, reigning matriarch and family wage-earner, favored his involvement with the baby. Mr. Davis expressed hope that staying involved with his child (via visits to the home and having his child "stay over" for several days from time to time) would enhance the chances that he and his partner would work toward sustaining their couple relationship. The mother was indecisive: though she liked him, felt he should be involved, and generally followed her grandmother's advice

without question, his problem behavior caused her to pause before making a definitive decision. However, since she was often at odds with her mother, her mother's strong objections ironically made him more desirable to her as a partner.

The Browns also bargained around the future of their couple relationship. He had asked for her hand in marriage several times. She refused to give him an answer, and had frequent mood swings (by her own admission) that caused her to withdraw, become enraged and contemptuous of him, and she often threatened to leave him with the baby. Though he had offered to go to couple counseling with her, she would not respond.

The Ames and Carters also report bargaining between themselves, family members, and community institutions in order to sustain their respective couple relationships.

At three months, the Davis couple had ended their couple relationship. He believed that she would eventually allow him more access to his child and subsequently, recommit to him. Instead, she was romantically involved with a former love interest. In response, he raised safety concerns about other men as physical and sexual predators in the presence of his infant daughter.

Mr. Brown, who was anxious to solidify his relationship with his daughter's mother via marriage, had become increasingly depressed. When asked if he would give up on the couple relationship, he was emphatic that giving up was not an option because he loved her and did not want to lose contact with his daughter.

Emotional Skills and Caring

At six weeks, the Davis couple reported increasing difficulty in managing their emotional skills. She reported that she felt threatened by him when she resisted his overtures to sustain their intimate relationship. Mr. Davis countered that she also would lose her temper when he tried to reason with her about rumors of his infidelity. He denied that his anger was aimed at her, but admitted that he resented that her family and friends were meddling

in their couple relationship.

Mr. Brown feared that his relationship with his partner and his daughter might end at any moment, and reported that his partner was prone to fits of anger with provocation. He indicated that she repeatedly threatened to leave him and that she would often cry uncontrollably because she felt depressed and trapped. When he tried to soothe her or offer her assurance otherwise, she would withdraw and sometimes become verbally abusive. She confirmed much of his account of the couple's relationship dynamics. She added, however, that it was difficult to be a mother and that he simply did not understand her plight. She felt vulnerable irrespective of his assurances.

At three months, the emotional skills management of the Davis couple had seriously deteriorated. She no longer wanted to talk with her baby's father and he contended that he was "fed up" with the situation. Mr. Davis noted that although she rejected him, other women viewed him as an ideal catch. While she was angry about his infidelity, he was embittered that she had since resumed a relationship with a former love interest with whom she had become involved with during Mr. Davis's incarceration.

Mr. Brown was preoccupied with his relationship with his daughter's mother, and appeared to be sinking further into depression. Although she was more cognizant of her troubling behavior, she had not improved in the management of her emotional skills, nor had she sought any professional help. She continued to feel misunderstood by him.

History of Parenting

At three weeks, Mr. Carter and Mr. Davis acknowledged having children other than the focal child, whereas Mr. Brown and Mr. Ames had children with their current partners only. Mr. Carter expressed anxiety about his relationship with his older, biological child, and stated that he was trying to work out an arrangement with the child's mother so that he could be more involved in her life. He is also the stepfather of his current partner's older child from a previous relationship. Mr. Davis had

had three children with other women, in addition to the focal child, and he had not sustained involvement with two of his children because of physical distance. Although he could see the third child as often as he wished, he rarely visited, because he does not like the child's mother.

Perspectives about Gender Norms Regarding Appropriate Parenting Roles

At six weeks, when queried about gender norms regarding appropriate roles for mothers and fathers, the couples reported that they were fairly happy about their current roles. Ms. Brown, Ms. Davis, and Ms. Carter reported that their partners had some gendered notions about parenthood, but contended that such notions were socially based and had hoped that, in time, the fathers would become more flexible and comfortable with assuming alternative parenting roles.

At three months, all fathers reported fewer reservations about undertaking a range of parenting roles, as their children grew older. They indicated feeling more empowered to provide an array of care. The fathers expressed that as they increased their care giving involvement for their babies, they felt they developed a stronger attachment to the baby and an increased understanding of the child's needs. Mothers reiterated their concern that the fathers viewed some parenting roles as gender specific.

Social Work Strategies for Increasing Paternal Involvement via Couple Engagement

In promoting paternal involvement among unwed parents, social work practitioners can draw on the strengths-perspective as a framework to examine the couple relationship (Saleebey, 1992). The in-depth interviews in the TLC3 Study illuminate the dynamic nature of couple relationships, and they are especially insightful with regards to how changes in the couple relationship (e.g., the birth of a child), affects the couple's interaction with one another and others. Although the birth of a child is generally regarded as a time of joy and celebration, it may simultaneously be a time of

stress and discord if the couple is developmentally, psychologically, emotionally, and financially unprepared to assume parenthood. The in-depth interviews suggest that parental role challenges and dysfunction negatively impact the couple relationship, even if this relationship is fairly solid prior to the birth of the child.

Social work strategies for increasing paternal involvement among unwed fathers will necessitate that social work practitioners rethink the composition of the family care constellation. Fathers are often ignored as providers of care for their children, especially their infant children. Unwed fathers are presumed to be absent and unconcerned about their partners and children, causing social workers to discount their roles as parents and supportive partners. Feelings of insecurity around parental instincts and a lack of knowledge about child development may cause fathers to doubt their ability to provide paternal care giving for their young children. When unwed fathers are engaged by social workers and provided with the necessary support to build and enhance their paternal identities, they can make important contributions to their children's overall well-being.

For unwed couples in committed, cohabiting relationships, the stressors associated with a new child may test their relationships' durability. With one exception, the couples presented herein were in committed relationships. Yet, the findings indicate that these couples struggled daily to sustain their couple relationships. The couple relationship can be viewed as a pathway for understanding the dynamics of couple interaction, and as a means of increasing paternal involvement. The findings of the in-depth interviews suggest that there are opportunities for social workers to engage both unwed mothers and fathers and to build upon the strengths of their couple relationship to address individual, couple, and parental stressors, including financial concerns, burdens, and other related problems.

Providing care for an infant child can be both exhilarating and exhausting; the latter, without suf-

ficient respite and resources, might gradually evolve into bouts of depression. Even experienced mothers might find sustaining such a balance difficult. First-time mothers and fathers may be especially vulnerable to bouts of joy and pain, happiness and fear. If these mothers are unwed parents, feelings of vulnerability and uncertainty may become episodic, and assurances from their partners often require measures beyond mere words to sustain them and their psychosocial well-being. Social work interventions aimed at meeting the needs of new infants are especially appropriate in these situations, for new mothers and fathers alike. In addition, having been a parent previously will not automatically make one a more involved parent on the second or third time around. Supportive services are needed to address these needs.

It is expected that mothers of newborn babies will be resistant to relinquishing the care of their infants to others, especially the babies' fathers. This may be due in part to the manifestation of the newborn as symbolic of nine months of maternal-child bonding. The majority of the mothers in this study were hesitant about their partners providing care for the baby, even with their supervision. Several mothers reported that they even hesitated entrusting their six-week-old baby's care to their own mothers and grandmothers. Ironically, these same mothers expressed concern that the fathers were not as helpful in caring for the baby as they had desired. Helping fathers recognize the broader scope of childcare, both physically and psychologically, could be essential in enhancing their capacity and comfort levels in the provision of care for their young children. The mother's disposition toward paternal provision of care was somewhat different when the baby was three months old. At this age, the mothers were far more willing to relinquish care to the fathers, and generally felt that the fathers, by now, should be prepared to provide care to their young children.

The time between the baby's birth and his/her three-month birthday may be ideal for preparing

fathers — via assistance from the mother, social worker, and others engaged in the family's dynamics — to provide direct care to his child. At this stage of development, the baby is larger and mothers may become more physically exhausted from providing primary care. Fathers may provide tangible support to their partners by joining in and providing care for their babies.

For unwed fathers, the provision of physical care may be the pathway to sustaining paternal involvement with the baby, even if the couple relationship has deteriorated. The social worker's recognition of the father as a resource can serve to meet the needs of the entire family in helping the couple to value the importance of a cooperative parenting relationship. Over time, such modeling of behavior may be instrumental to continued paternal involvement and child well-being.

The couple's means of negotiating parenting roles and engagement may also be key to sustaining a couple relationship and paternal involvement over time. The father's potential increase in the provision of childcare may not necessarily coincide with maternal expectations. Several mothers reported that when their partners felt comfortable enough or increased their provision of childcare, the fathers' efforts were generally limited and time-bound. For example, with one exception, the mothers complained that fathers were generally not available or receptive to changing and bathing the baby or giving the early morning feedings. Several of the fathers retorted that even at three months, they had some reservations about bathing the baby for fear that an accident might befall the baby while entrusted in their care. Other fathers stated that they could not be expected to give 3:00 a.m. feedings and get up at 5:00 a.m. to prepare for work.

Negotiating reasonable expectations for paternal care giving varied among fathers and couples in the study. An otherwise durable couple relationship may be sensitive to such negotiations, and the social worker's assistance in helping the couple with goal-setting, expectations, and flexibility with

regard to parental roles could be key to strengthening the parental and couple bonds. The social worker may act as a sounding board, an objective referee, as well as an instructor, in helping the couple to navigate the otherwise turbulent waters of parenting. Drawing upon examples of bargaining and negotiation within the couple relationship (or strengthening those skills), the social worker can assist the couple as parents in enhancing their parenting skills specifically.

The immediate families of origin may also facilitate and enhance paternal involvement in childcare. In the in-depth interviews, several couples referenced the roles played by their family members in building skill levels among the fathers in providing childcare. The role of the paternal family of origin may be especially crucial to nonresident fathers' provision of childcare. The unwed father in the estranged couple relationship repeatedly referenced the role played by his partner's grandmother in keeping him involved in his daughter's life, even at the point when it was disclosed that he had been unfaithful to her granddaughter and impregnated another woman while she was expecting their child. He also referred to the role that his own grandmother played in trying to keep him connected to his children. Social workers engaged in family interventions and practice with fragile families, like those who comprise this study, should fully access all resources that may be available to these couples, including the paternal family of origin.

Families of origin may be a source of conflict and stress for new parents as well, especially when pregnancies are unplanned or the couples' financial statuses are exhausted. Again, social workers can play a critical role in helping the family of procreation, irrespective of its current structure, identify and articulate its goals for the future and the potential resources available to achieve them. Often, young parents need assistance in negotiating these issues with their families of origin, especially if their future goals do not coincide with family expectations. Social workers can provide valuable

assistance in mediating these often difficult, evolving relationships between the young couple and their families of origin.

Commitment to household chores may be a logical pathway for sustaining paternal involvement among unwed fathers. Paternal assumptions regarding household chores and tasks may be particularly well received when the baby is an infant and the mother is reluctant to relinquish childcare. During the pregnancy and immediately following the baby's birth, some of the fathers increased their share of household chores. They reported that this action allowed their partners to remain on bed rest with limited childcare responsibilities. The mothers appreciated their assistance, but had assumed that the fathers would take responsibility for all household chores.

The offer and engagement of the fathers, however, seemed to strengthen the parenting bond and couple relationship simultaneously. Social workers seeking points of entry to increase unwed father involvement should stress the importance that these fathers assume some responsibility for household chores as a pathway to increased paternal involvement. As fathers assume more direct care responsibilities, they might balance those responsibilities with their assumptions of household chores.

Several mothers reported an emerging tension regarding their partners' engagement in childcare and household responsibilities. Specifically, the mothers reported that when the fathers assumed more responsibility for household chores, they often reduced their provision of (or commitment to provide) childcare. The mothers contended that such tradeoffs reflected the gender inequity of parenting roles, and thwarted the couple's efforts to equalize parenting roles and responsibilities. This tension offers social workers additional opportunities to enhance bargaining and negotiation skills among unwed and other vulnerable parents. Because this tension can exert strain on the couple relationship, the parenting relationship may be affected, and the social worker's assistance toward

resolution could be critical to sustaining paternal involvement.

The unexpected loss of couple time, for strengthening and building the couple relationship subsequent to the baby's birth, could result in the relationship's deterioration. For first-time parents, the effects may be more devastating because their experiences and resilience as a couple may provide the blueprint for the parenting relationship. Both fathers and mothers in this study reported that they were unprepared to cope with the effects they experienced as a result of the loss of time together. Some reported that the loss of time affected their communication patterns, while others lamented the gradual decline of couple intimacy. For mothers, this couple loss reflected the tension between meeting the baby's needs and the mother's needs as a partner in a committed relationship. Fathers were generally more expressive about the loss of couple time, but less vocal about discussing their concerns with their partners for fear it might reflect insensitivity on their part.

This tension provides an excellent opportunity for social work interventions aimed at addressing couple and parenting needs in resolving seemingly conflicting goals. Helping the couple to express such concerns to one another and prioritize their needs with respect to their multiple identities as intimate partners and parents enables the social worker to guide the couple in addressing a continuing dilemma. The social worker might help the couple to identify individual and collective needs and resources to address these issues. Families of origin can be key resources in helping couples to resolve these issues, but may not have been engaged to date. The social worker could assist the couple in identifying family as well as other resources.

Similarly, couples also need individual time. When queried about whether mothers and fathers had spent time alone or with friends since the baby's birth, all fathers, and with one exception, all mothers, reported having individual time. Social workers might use this example of individual prior-

itizing as a means for building consensus and support for prioritizing couple time, while articulating that the strength of the couple relationship will enhance the parenting relationship, thus sustaining paternal involvement.

Disagreements over money were cited as the most contentious issue facing these couples. Their financial statuses exacerbated these disagreements and raised important issues regarding the stability of these relationships. Social work interventions aimed not only at providing material support to strengthen families' economic security, but skill-building sessions to enhance parents' abilities to realistically address financial stressors are important for stabilizing and strengthening fragile families. For unwed parents, issues related to finances are potentially the most volatile, as fathers and mothers in these relationships are disproportionately unemployed or underemployed. Social work interventions aimed at helping individuals and couples improve their human capital, through the acquisition of job readiness training, employment referrals, and budgeting strategies, might minimize individual and couple tensions around financial instability. These services are especially salient to fathers, who often view the provider role as tantamount to all other couple and parenting roles.

In general, the couples in this study evidenced inadequate individual and couple communication skills. While disclosures about perceived and actual financial stressors encompassed the most volatile discussions, these couples possessed equally weak communication skills around intimacy, parental and couple expectations, and disappointments. As previously stated, possessing effective bargaining and negotiation skills is critical for successfully navigating couple and parenting relationships. Some of these couples were experiencing parenthood for the first time, and hesitated to discuss highly emotional issues during such a tense time for fear of causing discord and strife. Individuals in couple relationships, who shared other children together, also reported that some topics were uncomfortable to

discuss with their partners. Whereas some of the mothers expressed disappointment that their partners were not more emotionally expressive, some of the fathers felt that their partners were overly sensitive about some issues. Both mothers and fathers, however, expressed reservations about approaching their partners with these concerns.

Social work interventions that help individuals in couple relationships become more comfortable and affirming about issues that affect how they relate to one another might minimize individual feelings of denial and strengthen couple and parenting bonds. Assistance aimed at fathers in this regard is especially critical, because they are less likely to have had help in dealing with such issues that affect them so strongly.

Summary and Conclusion

Most of the unwed couples interviewed in this study are committed to one another. In fact, when asked individually if they planned to get married, all parents, save one father, reported that they would get married in the future. Furthermore, when asked individually if they would marry their current partners, all of the couples, save the one estranged couple, reported they would do so. When asked what prevented them from marrying presently, they expressed concerns about individual and couple

communication, maturity, and most importantly, financial stability. Public policies aimed at strengthening fragile families are best received when they begin with these couples where they are presently: as unwed couples struggling to make their relationships sustain the pressures of life. Generally, commitment to one another does not appear to be lacking here.

When the couple relationship between unwed parents is viewed as a process, not only is it open for examination in seeking ways to better connect fathers to their children, it may be equally instructive for understanding the pathways by which unwed parents, over time, move to more secure and legal commitments to one another as a couple and to their children. More importantly, this critical examination allows social workers and other intervention workers to better understand the challenges faced by these parents, and how these challenges persist, irrespective of the legal status of the couple or parenting relationship. Because of their training, social workers should be keenly aware and professionally equipped to assist unwed parents in achieving realistic goals that lead to greater family security and development, including marriage. A modified approach to the family policy *du jour* is necessary, if family life and child well-being are to triumph. Social workers can rally to lead this cause.

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Appendix

Fatherhood Websites

Organizations

- **American Coalition for Fathers and Children**
<http://www.acfc.org>
- **Center for Successful Fathering**
<http://www.fathering.org>
- **Dad-to-Dad**
<http://www.slowlane.com/d2d>
- **The Fatherhood Project**
Families and Work Institute
Bank Street College of Education
<http://www.fatherhoodproject.org>
- **National Center on Fathers and Families**
University of Pennsylvania
<http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu>
- **National Center for Fathering**
<http://www.fathers.com>
- **National Center for Strategic Nonprofit Planning and Community Leadership**
<http://www.npcl.org>
- **National Fatherhood Initiative**
<http://www.fatherhood.org>

Other Fathers' Websites

- **At-Home Dad Newsletter**
<http://www.parentsplace.com>
- **The Department of Health and Human Services: Fatherhood Initiative**
<http://fatherhood.hhs.gov>
- **Father's Rights to Custody**
<http://www.deltabravo.net/custody>
- **Father's World: Websites on fathering**
<http://www.fathersworld.com>
- **National Partnership for Women and Families**
<http://www.nationalpartnership.org>
- **Nurturing Fathers Program**
<http://www.nurturingfathers.com>
- **Promoting Responsible Fathering**
<http://www.vev.ch/en>