



**The 2008 Kristin Anderson Moore Lecture
*Marriage: Love It or Leave It?***

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Pendulum Swings in Family Policy

Let me see by a show of hands how many are planning to attend the inauguration next month. I'm not. City officials are planning for an estimated crowd of five million. I learned in 2001 that inaugural crowds make it impossible to get around town. There were only 200,000 people at the inauguration that year. There was such enthusiasm among George Bush supporters that I almost forgot the other business that had brought me to DC that day, and I ended up getting home much later than I had planned. There were more 10-gallon hats and Western boots than I had ever seen, and I thought to myself: "This is really going to take the Washington community and the Eastern establishment by surprise." After running an election campaign in which many voters had difficulty distinguishing between George Bush and Al Gore, the Bush Administration took the Washington community, the nation, and the world by surprise!

My experience was more than a surprise; it was a rude awakening. All during the 2000 election campaign, there were clear signals that both candidates Bush and Gore would support responsible fatherhood, a field that I had spent much of the previous decade trying to build. With the help of the previous Administration, there was an evolving collaboration between the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), especially child support enforcement, community-based responsible fatherhood programs, and private philanthropy, all working to increase the positive involvement of fathers in the lives of children, financially and otherwise.

The work really took off when Vice President Gore devoted his 1994 Family Reunion conference in Tennessee to the role of fathers in families. He brought a diverse body of local leaders and national responsible fatherhood leaders from all across the country to discuss how we could all work together, with the help of government, to strengthen families by engaging fathers in the lives of children. We were so encouraged that we virtually ignored a single dissenter voice, David Blankenhorn, who insisted that marriage was the optimal circumstance for fathers to play a role in the lives of children and any government efforts to promote father involvement, through welfare reform or other means, should emphasize marriage. Because so few poor or minority children were born to married couple families, I did not see the relevance of the idea to my own quest to reduce disparities in birth outcomes and child wellbeing between single- and two-parent families. So over the next five years, encouraged by the Executive Order that President Clinton signed on my birthday in 1995, I joined this happy band and went merrily along building a knowledge base and the capacity of programs to provide more effective responsible fatherhood services, and launching efforts to measure their impact on children and families.

My colleagues, such as Irv Garfinkel, make the point that partisanship has made it difficult to move forward in public policy because a change in the political balance of power swings the pendulum in many areas of public policy from the far left to the far right and back again. The result is like climbing a ladder, with rungs that go only half-way across. After you advance one step, you can go no further, because there is no secure footing for your other foot. I saw this happening shortly after Republicans took control of the House of Representatives in 1994.

I began to pay more attention, however, in 1998 when Rep. Clay Shaw, then Chair of the Committee on Ways and Means, reintroduced the role of fathers in welfare reform during the 1998 hearings on the Fathers Count Act by emphasizing marriage. This bill tried to define what the Congress meant by encouraging the formation and maintenance of two-parent families. This left out most of us in the important behind-the-scenes activities that go into policymaking because the Congress really meant two-parent married families. Most women's groups and traditional welfare reform advocates were sharply opposed to the whole idea. But newly invited to the table to contribute to the policies that define what practitioners can do, most responsible fatherhood leaders formed a loose, multi-racial coalition. We were seeking a balance between marriage promotion and other strategies to assist and encourage fathers to play a more active role in reducing child and family poverty that would be acceptable to women's groups, traditional welfare advocates, and broad-spectrum stakeholders in welfare reform. How naïve we were!

Other signs of trouble occurred in the Bush Administration's 2002 budget, which included \$100 million in support of the development of healthy marriage demonstration projects. By contrast, the \$60 million President Bush had committed to support efforts to promote responsible fatherhood had been pared back to \$20 million, along with cutbacks and other domestic initiatives needed pay for the "war against terrorism." Then Congress authorized \$150 million annually over five years for the Administration's Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood initiative in the Deficit Reduction Act in 2005. This Act made clear that the Congressional intent was to strengthen the formation and maintenance of two-parent, married families. In line with this, the Administration devoted the lion's share to Healthy Marriage demonstrations, leaving only \$50 million in support of responsible fatherhood programs. Moreover, services had to be cleared by domestic violence organizations. To add insult to injury, no organization of which I was aware that was providing services in the responsible fatherhood field received a single dollar of funding under this program.

Since then, the programs that were funded have been learning their craft and how to provide the services which they could describe on paper, while many programs that had been operating prior to 2000 were no longer in business. Moreover, with the exception of one national, intermediary organization with strong ties to the Bush Administration, most of the national intermediaries that had been working to build the capacity and funding base of community-based programs have been struggling just to sustain themselves in a much diminished market. Few local programs have the resources to support the services the national organizations have to offer. As result, the field has been left highly fragmented and decimated. One organization with strong ties to the current Administration received multi-million dollar contracts to provide technical assistance to community-based organizations and other nonprofits who expanded their services to include responsible fatherhood. Meanwhile, the national and local organizations that had been doing this work for almost two decades have been struggling to survive, and the task of rebuilding it at the national, state, and local level lies ahead. Moreover, some momentum gained by Early Head Start (EHS) programs jointly funded by Administration for Children, Youth and Families (ACYF) and the Office of Child Support Enforcement until 2003 has been lost.

Besides capacity, much valuable time has been lost. During the last eight years, the proportion of children born to non-marital fathers, the primary clients of community-based responsible father programs, has climbed to 40 percent. Let me repeat that. Almost two-fifths of children in United States are born to unmarried parents, including nearly 70 percent of African-American children.

Along with new funding and consequent surge in healthy marriage services, the Bush Administration has spawned a major expansion in research on marriage, especially among lower-income and minority populations. What have we learned from this research? What does it suggest about the potential importance of the healthy marriage services, the effects of which may remain unknown, if the pendulum swings again?

The Dynamics of Fragile Families

When their children were born, 80 percent of the unmarried mothers in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey thought their chances of marrying the fathers of their children were good to excellent. Among mothers who were cohabiting at birth, only 28 percent had married the child's father by the child's fifth birthday; marriage at five years was even less frequent (6 percent) among mothers who were romantically involved at birth. By contrast, among mothers who were married, cohabiting, or romantically involved at birth, 21, 42, and 74 percent, respectively, were no longer romantically involved with the father by their child's fifth birthday.

Among mothers who had already ended their romantic relationships with fathers at birth, about half were living with a new partner and about a third had already had a new child with a new partner five years later. These figures were slightly lower for mothers who were still romantically involved with the fathers of the children at birth (38 percent and 30 percent, respectively). Mothers who were cohabiting or married to the fathers of the children at birth were much less likely to be living with a new partner or to have a child by a new partner, but the risk of multiple partner fertility was still high. Fewer than 10 percent of mothers married at baseline were living with a new partner five years later and only about 5 percent had a new child with a new partner. The prevalence of new cohabiting partners and new births by new partners was about double for mothers who were cohabiting at birth.

Finally, it appears that unmarried mothers and fathers may be playing a zero-sum game, with uncertain consequences for children. Stability of the father-child relationship may complement stability or inertia of informal father-mother relationships, if neither parent moves on to another, perhaps, more enduring relationship. If unmarried fathers continue to visit their children and do not re-partner themselves, mothers are less likely to marry, but not less likely to cohabit with, new partners. This could occur for three reasons:

1. If he has not re-partnered and has other attributes (e.g., employment), his visiting reduces pressure on the mother to find a new partner.
2. A father's visit brings with it role confusion. Is he just a visiting father, or is he a "package deal?" If it is the latter, then his visits are both an exercise in fatherhood and a source of romantic feeling. If the father re-partners, there is less role confusion for the mother. He has clearly moved on, and there is little possibility of romance despite his continued involvement as a father. This frees the mother to pursue new romantic relationships. From a new suitor's perspective, the presence of a non-resident father is less threatening now that the father is involved with a new partner.
3. However, when relationship quality declines following the pregnancy, there is an actual or perceived decline in the father's commitment to the focal child. If the father

subsequently re-partners, he may further disassociate himself from his fathering role voluntarily or as a consequence of maternal gatekeeping. Either way, this increases pressure on the mother to find a suitable partner both for her romantic feelings and her child's paternal needs, which may or not be well-served by a new partner.

For example, in a recent study of unmarried parents [published in 2008 by Mowdy], 57 percent of fathers had seen their three-year-old children at least one day in the previous month; by year five, the percentage of visiting fathers dropped to 53. By year three, only 4 percent of mothers had married a new partner, while 17 percent are living with a new partner. These numbers were not much higher at year five: 7 percent of mothers had a new husband, while 22 percent had a new cohabiting partner.

In sum, transitions to marriage are rare; non-marital relationships are unstable; and re-partnering is common, once romantic relationships end. Therefore, most non-marital children will remain in contact with their biological fathers, but few will do so in secure cohabiting or married unions. Instead, the majority will sustain contact with their non-resident fathers until they are separated by a new romantic relationship involving one of their parents, which may or may not result in marriage. Since custody in the case of non-marital births most often resides with the mother, this will bring the child into a blended, fragile family. Though we know that mothers trade up, choosing new partners who are more educated, employed, and supportive than biological fathers, the literature on mainstream blended families [for example, a 2008 study by Harknett] provides little hope that children will be better off, especially if new relationships do not result in marriage.

What Are the Prospects of Improving Child Well-being By Engaging Low-Income Fathers?

Fortunately, researchers have continued to examine data collected during the Clinton Administration on father involvement, with or without marriage, despite little new funding to analyze these data. These analyses tell us how to guide the pendulum, should it swing away from healthy marriage. Some of the most important analyses for our present question come from studies of children enrolled in Early Head Start or from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Study, which included families that were or were not randomly assigned to Early Head Start programs, after low-income mothers volunteered.

First, we know that a majority of Early Head Start children have a father involved in their lives and that greater father involvement in program activities was associated with better outcomes of children and more father involvement in their children's schools. Corroborating the evidence from Fragile Families, cited above, most Early Head Start children live in fragile families in which fathers are involved, but not necessarily living with the child. Independent samples reached similar conclusions about the prevalence of father involvement (70 percent to 76 percent children with involved father, whether resident or nonresident), but this is slightly lower than almost 90 percent reported by mothers. Thus, the potential for engaging nonresident involved fathers in program activities may be greater than currently believed. When programs made special efforts to make them feel welcome and create services that met their needs, fathers appear to respond by participating in larger numbers. Despite the successes, there are still many challenges to full involvement of fathers that need to be overcome [See 2006 article by Raikes and Bellotti].¹

Even though low-income fathers are less likely to be married than middle-class fathers, some of what we know about the latter can be applied to the former. In particular, by asking their children more complex questions, low-income fathers, like middle-class fathers, may enhance their children's language capacity. This may be especially important because low-income

children are normally exposed to less language input than children in middle-class families. Moreover, though marital status is highly correlated with residential status, resident and nonresident fathers have similar communication styles.²

We know that fathers who were more prenatally involved were likely to interact with their children often between age one and three and were also more likely to be employed than fathers who were less prenatally involved.³

We know that fathers engage with their infants positively at 8 and 16 months old and that father-child interactions appear to be bidirectional. Thus, fathers with didactic behavior and responsive behavior promote their infants' social and communication development, while infants with more social and communications skills promote fathers' responsive behavior.⁴

We know that some low-income fathers are more involved with their infants than others, but early childhood programs may influence the pathways through which some father characteristics affect father involvement with infants. For example, low-income fathers are more involved with their infants in early childhood education programs when they are older, more educated, less depressed, more spiritual, work fewer hours, or make use of social supports.^{5,6} However, the association between education and involvement in Early Head Start programs may occur because program staff are more likely to interact with fathers with similar education. Thus, less-educated fathers might be encouraged to participate in early childhood education programs if staff were trained to reduce the barriers between the father's education and their own. By scheduling parenting classes for fathers during non-work hours, fathers might acquire skills that improve child well-being, and practice these skills in the evenings and on weekends. Further, psychological well-being improves the prospects that fathers use social support services, while traditional beliefs about the bread-winner role discourages the use of social support.⁷ In other words, some fathers may be reluctant to seek help for fear of being judged incompetent by others. But practitioners who work with unemployed, underemployed, or substance-abusing fathers have found ways of making help-seeking behavior "safe" for their clients. Surely these ways can be adapted to encourage low-income fathers to seek help in becoming better fathers.

Other suggestions for increasing the participation of fathers in childcare programs also emerged from the Early Head Start studies. In particular, childcare programs may have to work with fathers and mothers on a more equal basis, as co-parents, because it is common for low-income parents to arrange their work schedules so that both mothers and fathers are primary caregivers when the other is working.^{8,9,10} Further, unemployment has been a major barrier to involvement in childcare programs among fathers with traditional beliefs about fathering roles. Childcare programs may want to consider removing this barrier by providing or referring fathers to employment services.¹¹

Many low-income fathers hold views of themselves that early childhood programs can use to encourage their participation. Besides the provider role, they view themselves as teachers and role models for their children, who provide emotional support and receive love in return. They also view financial support as the "admission ticket" for the opportunity to be involved with their children.¹²

However, the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Study warns that there are clear racial differences in associations between father connectedness and child outcomes. As compared with children with no or unstable relationships with their fathers, children living with their biological fathers and those with actively involved, nonresident, biological fathers generally had better child outcomes, especially in self-regulation and aggressive behavior. However, these

associations between father connectedness and child outcomes were less consistent for Latin American children. Moreover, for African American children: (1) there was no association between father connectedness and self-regulation; (2) children who lived with their biological fathers scored lower on measures of cognitive development; and (3) children with non-resident biological fathers scored lower on indices of aggression.¹³

Practitioner surveys show racial and ethnic differences in the involvement of fathers in the lives of low-income children in families across resident and nonresident status. A program serving African-American families in which a majority of involved fathers are nonresident uses different strategies for engaging fathers than programs serving families with mostly resident fathers.

The level of fathers' resources (education and employment) did not explain variations in the extent to which low-income white, black, and Latino fathers were involved with their children. In contrast, white fathers, who generally are more educated and have higher employment rates than minority fathers, were less involved with their children. Lower rates of involvement among white fathers appeared to be associated with higher rates of re-partnering among white mothers. By contrast, African American and Latino mothers were more likely to maintain romantic or friendly relationships with the fathers of their children, and less likely to re-partner. Such relationships appear to sustain ongoing father engagement.¹⁴

This is a problem with everything we can learn from studies of fathers who actually participated in Early Head Start programs or from the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Study. Besides controlling whether or not they and their children would be considered for Early Head Start programs, mothers also determined whether or not fathers would participate. Put differently, mothers are often gatekeepers for father involvement. They decide when and how fathers get involved with their infants.¹⁵ Even though fathers' characteristics, including the mother-father relationship, did not predict the quality of father-infant relationships, fathers were more likely to be involved with their infants enrolled in Early Head Start programs, if they were married, completed high school, and earned higher incomes.¹⁶

Whether or not their children were randomly assigned to Early Head Start programs, most fathers in the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Study made themselves available for their two-year-old children and engaged with their children regularly. Resident fathers were more involved with their children than nonresident fathers, and nonresident fathers who were romantically involved with the mothers were more involved with their children than other fathers.¹⁷ Romantic involvement with mothers probably selected these fathers into higher levels of involvement than other fathers. Thus, some fathers may not participate in the early childhood programs because of maternal gatekeeping, which bars their participation after the end of a romantic relationship.

This is supported by growing evidence based on other surveys that low-income fathers appear to remain involved with their children as long as they remain romantically involved with their children's mothers [published in 2002 by Hoffereth], and that re-partnering by mothers appears to reduce biological father involvement [as published in 2004 by King, and in a forthcoming publication by Tach, Mincy, et.al.).

The Role of Healthy Marriage Services

Today, close to 40 percent of American children are born to non-marital parents. Though some of these children will be in non-poor households, we know that children in single-mother households have poverty rates five times those of children in two-parent families. In a world of time-limited cash assistance and work requirements, few non-marital children can hope to compete with children born to married couple families, because the time and budget constraints

under which their mothers labor are likely to create great inequities between the quantity and quality of caregiving they and marital children receive. The hope of healthy marriage services is to deliver two wildly committed parents to each non-marital child, by supporting those who:

1. thought they would marry to fulfill their expectations,
2. break up to secure more enduring relationships in which one man will be called upon to raise the child of another, or
3. choose to co-parent outside of marriage as effectively as they can.

Unfortunately, the healthy marriage policy debate (e.g.: Marriage Love it or Leave it?) is currently being framed too narrowly to accomplish these goals.

I propose changing the rhetoric around the healthy marriage initiative so that service providers can serve people, especially parenting couples who find themselves in any of the three groups above, especially the third. Allowable services are needed to broaden the scope of the services that can be provided, including services intended to help clients attend to their educational and employment needs.

¹ Raikes, H. & Bellotti, J. (2006). Two Studies of Father Involvement in Early Head Start Programs: A National Survey and a Demonstration Program Evaluation. *Parenting: Science and Practice*, Vol 6(2-3), 229-242.

² Rowe, M., Coker, D., & Pan, B. (2004). A Comparison of Fathers' and Mothers' Talk to Toddlers in Low-income Families. *Social Development*, Vol 13(2), 278-291.

³ Cabrera et al. (2008). Why Should We Encourage Unmarried Fathers to be Prenatally Involved? *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol 70(5), 1118-1121.

⁴ Shannon et al. (2006). Fathering in Infancy: Mutuality and Stability Between 8 and 16 Months. *Parenting: Science and Practice*, Vol 6(2-3), 167-188.

⁵ Roggman et al. (2002). Getting dads involved: Predictors of father involvement in Early Head Start and with their children. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, Vol. 23(1), 62-78.

⁶ Shannon, J., Tamis-LeMonda, C., & Margolin, A. (2005). Father Involvement in Infancy: Influences of Past and Current Relationships. *Infancy*, 8(1), 21-41.

⁷ Roggman, L., Boyce, L., Cook, G., & Cook, J. (2002, February). Getting dads involved: Predictors of father involvement in Early Head Start and with their children. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 23(1/2), 62-78.

⁸ McAllister, C., Wilson, P., & Burton, J. (2004). From Sports Fans to Nurturers: An Early Head Start Program's Evolution Toward Father Involvement. *Fathering*, Vol 2(1), 31-59.

⁹ Summers, J.A., Boller, K., Schiffman, R.F., Raikes, H.H. (2006). The eaning of 'Good Fatherhood:' Low-Income Fathers' Social Constructions of Their Roles. *Parenting: Science and Practice*, Vol 6 (203), 145-165.

¹⁰ McAllister, C., Wilson, P., & Burton, J. (2004, December). From Sports Fans to Nurturers: An Early Head Start Program's Evolution Toward Father Involvement. *Fathering*, 2(1), 31-59.

¹¹ McAllister, C., Wilson, P., & Burton, J. (2004, December). From Sports Fans to Nurturers: An Early Head Start Program's Evolution Toward Father Involvement. *Fathering*, 2(1), 31-59.

¹² Summers, J.A., Boller, K., Schiffman, R.F., Raikes, H.H. (2006). The eaning of 'Good Fatherhood:' Low-Income Fathers' Social Constructions of Their Roles. *Parenting: Science and Practice*, Vol 6 (203), 145-165.

¹³ Vogel et al. (2006). Relation Between Father Connectedness and Child Outcomes. *Parenting: Science and Practice*, Vol 6(2-3), 189-209.

¹⁴ Cabrera, N., Mitchell, S., Ryan, R., Shannon, J., & Tamis-LeMonda, C. (2008). Low-Income, Nonresident Father Involvement With Their Toddlers: Variation by Fathers' Race and Ethnicity. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22(4), 643-647.

¹⁵ Roggman, L., Boyce, L., Cook, G., & Cook, J. (2002, February). Getting dads involved: Predictors of father involvement in Early Head Start and with their children. *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 23(1/2), 62-78.

¹⁶ Shannon, J., Tamis-LeMonda, C., & Margolin, A. (2005). Father Involvement in Infancy: Influences of Past and Current Relationships. *Infancy*, 8(1), 21-41.

¹⁷ Cabrera, N., Ryan, R., Shannon, J., Brooks-Gunn, J., Vogel, C., Raikes, H., et al. (2004). Low-Income Fathers' Involvement in Their Toddlers' Lives: Biological Fathers From the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Study. *Fathering*, 2(1), 5-36.