

Father's money, mother's money, and parental commitment

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*This article results from the author's work in reviewing a number of studies, carried out in a wide range of countries, that examined factors determining fathers' commitment to their children, and theories which could explain patterns of commitment. It is extracted from Patrice Engle's contribution to *Wealth and Well-being* by R Blumberg and others, and concentrates on 'non-western' countries and/or cultures. The original article also contains a highly detailed summary of two studies, one in Nicaragua, the other in Guatemala. *Wealth and Well-being* was published by the Westview Press in 1994. Further details about the book and other Westview Press publications can be obtained from Westview Press Inc, 5500 Central Avenue, Boulder, CO 80301, USA; and <http://www.westviewpress.com>*

Studies identify the following major factors that determine fathers' commitment to their children:

- cultural norms in the society toward the fathering role; economic ability of the father to support a family;
- the nature or warmth of the father/mother relationship; and individual psychological factors of the men – the notion that only mothers are biologically programmed to attend to their children has not received support;
- a substantial body of literature suggests that although fathers in most cultures do not perform much child care, they can attend as warmly and responsively to their children as mothers.¹

Cultural factors are important; for example, in patrilineal ethnic groups of Cameroon, it is acknowledged that the father's role is one of providing his children with lineage connections; the mother's responsibility is to provide food and economic support for both father and children.² He has little contact with young children. However, the cultural ideal of non-involved fathers is in rapid flux. Many countries report emerging beliefs that fathers should be involved much more in child care and nurturing than previously, although actual change is slow.

Other economic and cultural changes have resulted in less father responsibility. For example, in Chile a decline in the authority of the Church

and in male privilege and an increase in television viewing and a demand for purchased goods, combined with rising women's labour force participation, have resulted in a rapid and dramatic alteration in the traditional authoritarian male role in urban, lower-class families.³ The result has been men's flight from their responsibilities for child and family support.

Lack of father responsibility has been associated with poor income-earning power in the United States, and in the rapidly urbanising areas of developing countries. Father commitment has also been found to be associated with the quality of the husband-wife relationship; for some men, the responsibility to children and the

relationship with the children's mother is a 'package deal'.⁴ Rising rates of divorce and children born out of wedlock are increasing dramatically the number of children raised by single mothers. The culture with the highest rate of father/infant interaction ever reported (the Aka pygmies) appears to be based on a subsistence system which requires husband and wife to cooperate and communicate in order to obtain by hunting needed food.⁵

A few programmes have attempted to increase father responsibility, both among intact families and with non-resident families. Whereas the majority have been in developed countries, efforts are beginning in Jamaica, Lesotho, Bangladesh, Colombia, and

elsewhere. The more successful efforts have increased the amount of father/child contact and father's child support payments. These strategies have included:

- support groups in which fathers share their experiences with other men, and learn how to parent;
- economic programmes to provide men with improved skills for earning a living;
- skill training, particularly prenatally, which helps fathers to know how and when to nurture their children;
- education in schools for future parents;
- mass media presentations of new models for fathers;
- extensive opportunities to take responsibility for the care of children.

Fathers who have had the experience of extended infant caretaking tend to become more aware of the child's needs, even if the reason for their extended caretaking may have been economic rather than a desire to expand their caretaking roles. Often mothers play a large role in helping fathers to be more involved. Becoming 'attached' to a child, which occurs during early care giving, appears to be a significant factor in long-term father/child bonds.⁶

We still know very little about factors that influence father commitment to children. Despite the messages of the 'new fatherhood', and images which present a committed and involved parent, the reality is that fewer fathers are taking responsibility for the economic support of their children than have in the past. Social

movements are demanding more of men at the same time that their status in the home is being undermined. Programmes to increase father commitment are in their infancy. Many programmes directed toward children, such as breastfeeding promotion, have not involved fathers. In development efforts, we must be wary of focusing on income generation for a mother without considering the increase in her workload, or the possibility that she could be supported by someone else while children are young. This calls for a development strategy to improve child welfare that not only provides opportunities for women's employment but also encourages father's commitments to their children. ○

notes

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3. Katzman R (1992) *Why are men so irresponsible?*; CEPAL Review 46
4. Furstenberg FF (1988) 'Good dads – bad dads: two faces of fatherhood' in Cherlin AJ (ed) *The Changing American Family and Public Policy*; Urban Institute Press, Washington, USA
5. Hewlett BS (1992) 'Husband-wife reciprocity and the father-infant relationship among Aka Pygmies,' in Hewlett BS (ed) *Father-child relations: cultural and biosocial contexts*; Aldine de Gruyter, New York, USA
6. Pedersen FA, Zaslow M, Cain RL, Suwalsky JT, and Rabinovich B (1987) 'Father-infant interaction among men who had contrasting affective responses during early infancy,' in Berman PW and Pedersen FA (eds) *Men's transitions to parenthood: longitudinal studies of early family experience*; Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, USA



Honduras: Father and child in La Cebadilla community
photo: Elaine Menotti, Hart Fellow with CCF Honduras