Fathers and Public Policies
Myths, Facts, Challenges, and Solutions

Written by
William Rogers • Cleopatra H. Caldwell, PhD • Chloé Gurin-Sands
Myth #1
Fathers are not interested in their children

Reality: Fathers are more interested than ever before in spending time with their children.

Recent findings show an increase in father involvement among nonresident fathers of 6-12 year olds from 18% in 1976 to 31% in 2002

(Amato, Meyers, & Emery, 2009)
Fact #1
Father involvement has increased between 1976 and 2002

Father Involvement: Then and Now

(Amato, Meyers, & Emery, 2009)
Myth #2
The government ignores fathers

Reality: Fathers are increasingly the focus of national legislation.

They are mentioned in such policies as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Early Head Start (EHS), and the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA).
Fact #2
Fathers are included in national legislation

The Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) legislation specifically mentions fathers.

In 2005, the government reserved $50 million for Responsible Fatherhood programs.

Responsible fatherhood programs define fathers as counselors, mentors, and providers.

(Deficit Reduction Act of 2005)
Myth #3
Helping fathers will hurt mothers

Reality: Helping fathers will help children, not hurt mothers; involving fathers in children’s lives results in better outcomes for children.

Previous research indicates that the involvement of nonresident African American fathers has been associated with positive youth outcomes.

(Coley & Medeiros, 2007; Dittus, Jaccard, & Gordon, 1997; King & Sobolewsik, 2006)
Fact #3
Policies help fathers help families

$150 million in government dollars have been reserved for the Healthy Marriage Initiative and for Responsible Fatherhood programs.

- The Healthy Marriage Initiative targets married fathers, focusing on improving marriages to improve family relationships.

- The Responsible Fatherhood programs target both married and unmarried fathers, focusing on improving economic stability and helping connect fathers to their children.

(Deficit Reduction Act of 2005)
Challenge #1
Defining “father” is difficult

Most policies define “fathers” as biological fathers, focusing on establishing paternity and enforcing child support.

Being a father is more than biology, and policies should reflect this.
Solution #1
Expand the definition of “father”

Rather than limiting what it means to be a father to only a provider, policymakers should focus on expanding the meaning of fatherhood.

Some states have fatherhood commissions and initiatives; these groups should focus on what it means to be a dad.

National policymakers should also redefine fatherhood. TANF should mention that fathers are more than providers; they are mentors, role-models, counselors, coaches, teachers, and so much more.
Challenge #2
Programs do not equally include fathers

Who does Early Head Start target?

Not all Early Head Start (EHS) programs encourage nonresident fathers to participate.

Nonresident fathers are not equally included in the education of their young children.

(Raikes, et al., 2002)
Solution #2
Policymakers should focus on involving more fathers in their children’s lives

The Early Head Start program should equally target all fathers. 100% of Early Head Start programs should report that they want nonresident fathers to be involved.

Programs should also find ways to make activities “father-friendly,” such as scheduling events on evenings and weekends and inviting all fathers in advance.
Challenge #3
Child support is often a burden for low-income fathers

Low-income fathers often pay more of their income in child support than other fathers.

This higher burden hurts fathers, and they are less able to pay child support than other fathers.

(Cancian, Meyer, & Han, 2011)
Solution #3

The government should reward responsible fathers with a special tax credit

Noncustodial fathers are responsible for providing support to their children, yet on taxes they are not recognized in the same way as custodial parents.

Low-income noncustodial fathers who are responsible and pay child support should be rewarded with an increased Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Rewarding responsible fathers will help both fathers and families.

(Mincy, et al., 2011)
Acknowledgements

This study was funded by the Center for Public Policy in Diverse Societies, at the Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy, University of Michigan.

We would like to specially thank the Fathers and Sons Steering Committee for their continued support of the Fathers and Sons Project.

Articles referenced in this report:


The Fathers and Sons Program is a Project of
The Prevention Research Center of Michigan
School of Public Health
University of Michigan