

**Summary of the Urban Seminar Series on Children's Health and Safety**  
**CONFERENCE ON FATHERHOOD**  
**April 23-24, 1999**  
**Harvard University**

**CONFERENCE OVERVIEW**

**INTRODUCTION**

The Urban Seminars were conceived as a forum to bring together researchers, practitioners, and policy makers who have a common interest in improving the health and well being of urban children. The Seminars are also regarded as a complement to the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Urban Health Initiative (UHI), a program in five cities which seeks to mobilize local community leaders to implement programs in an effort to improve the lives of urban youth. It is hoped that the Urban Seminars will provide the best and most up-to-date research information to practitioners and policy makers, and in turn, that practitioners and policy makers will inform researchers through their ground-level experiences and perspectives. Through creative thinking, ongoing interactions, and synergistic perspectives, we hope that the Urban Seminar Series will create new ideas which will motivate policy, program development, and research agendas.

**MAIN CONCLUSIONS**

Throughout the seminar, there was consensus on the importance of urban fathers for the well being of children, families, and communities. However, our understanding of the meaning of fatherhood for families and communities, of the mechanisms and processes through which fathers influence their children and families, and of the steps that communities and intervention programs can take to help support healthy male involvement is still rudimentary. Research on

urban fathers is in its childhood, and much remains to be learned. Similarly, child- and family-based services have only recently focused on the inclusion of fathers. Nonetheless, the seminar indicated that researchers and practitioners have much to share with each other, and that useful suggestions can be made from our current knowledge base. These include the following:

*Paternal Emotional and Financial Stability.* Urban men need to be healthy and productive themselves in order to be involved parents and positive members of family systems. Two primary areas appear to take precedence: father's emotional stability and employment. Many urban men need to deal with their own family histories and father-child relationships before they can be warm and loving parents to their own children. Peer support groups show promise in helping fathers heal emotionally. A significant proportion of urban men are also jobless or under-employed, and thus cannot fulfill their financial obligations to their children and families. Quality education and employment services are necessary to help fathers reenter the job market, which is increasingly technology oriented.

*Family Systems Perspective.* Efforts to improve father-child relations will not succeed without attention to the broader family system. Fathers and children do not live in a vacuum, but rather are immersed in family systems, often dominated by mothers and grandmothers. In order for fathers to have regular access to their children, they must have healthy relationships with their children's mothers and other primary caregivers. Efforts to encourage fathers to be more active parents will not succeed unless other caregivers accept and support such involvement.

*Early intervention.* Research implies that even in cases of nonmarital births, parents are usually romantically involved and have high expectations for active fathering at the time of the child's birth. In many such families, these behaviors and attitudes appear to decline precipitously over the few years immediately following the birth. Thus, the child's birth and the

infant/toddler years provide an opportune time for unmarried fathers to build strong and sustainable roles in their children's lives. Fatherhood programs could aim to coordinate with the significant number of early childhood interventions already in place to strengthen early father-child interaction.

*Practice informing research.* While many of these program suggestions have come from research, practitioners also have a role to play in informing future research efforts on urban fathers. Practitioners can provide valuable insights on the likely processes and pathways through which fathers influence children, on community norms regarding active fathering, and on activities and roles fathers engage in which hold the most meaning for children and youth. In addition, program developers should use the beliefs and desires of the fathers and families within their clientele to develop intervention priorities and services.

*Research informing policy.* Finally, there is significant concern over the efficacy of current public policies directed at fathers. The major policies affecting fathers are newly strengthened paternity establishment and child support regulations. The effects of these new requirements on low-income and minority men are not well understood, but initial information supports reason for concern. It seems possible that the new regulations could increase parental contentiousness and even lower total income for some women on welfare due to decreased informal aid. A shift from informal to formal support might also decrease men's bargaining power and ability to gain access to their children. Research has an important role to play in informing public policy in this area.

## CONFERENCE SUMMARY

### PREVIOUS RESEARCH

*Rebekah Levine Coley, "Urban Fathers and Their Children: An Overview of Theory and Research"*

The background paper summarized the current state of knowledge concerning urban fathers and how they affect their children's well being. Demographic information indicates that a large proportion of urban men are not married to and do not reside with their children's mothers and hence, do not play extremely active fathering roles. Significant racial/ethnic patterns in both marriage and paternal involvement are apparent, but research has yet to determine what proportion of such differences are due to culture and what proportion to socioeconomic differences, urbanicity, attitudes, or other factors. To date, the research base on urban fathers is slim, and we have especially inadequate information from men themselves. The paper stressed the need for the research community to help define fatherhood from men's perspectives.

We do know, however, that education and employment, civil mother-father relationships, and extended family support are all important predictors of active fathering by urban men. The links between these factors, however, are not well understood. Intervention programs are currently working to impact fathers' financial and social parenting behaviors. Continued research will help to delineate the success of such efforts for various groups of fathers.

Finally, the research on fathers' impacts on child well-being is a growing field, although work with urban fathers remains minimal. National surveys generally have inadequate information on fathers' relationships with children, especially for nonresident fathers. Research

which considers links between fathers' financial support or visitation patterns and child well-being generally finds null or inconsistent results. However, a number of new studies, with smaller samples and innovative methodologies and measures, have found significant links between father involvement and children's functioning in emotional, behavioral, and cognitive realms. Important lessons emerge from this work. First, fathers are not always a positive force in children's lives. Inconsistent involvement or alienated relationships have been linked to poor emotional and behavioral functioning in adolescents. On the other hand, warm father-child relationships and active paternal involvement predict better emotional functioning, higher academic achievement, and fewer problem behaviors for children and youth. On the methodological side, recent research indicates the success of new data collection techniques. For instance, research which allows children to identify their father or father-figure and which does not impose restrictions by biological relatedness or residence status appear to provide a more thorough picture of father-child relationships. In addition, more attention is needed to developing valid and reliable measures of father involvement for urban and minority populations.

## **SESSION 1: CONSTRUCTS OF FATHERHOOD**

*Kathryn Edin, "Doin' the best I can: How low-income, non-custodial fathers in Philadelphia talk about their families"*

*Discussant: Jerry Tello*

Edin's paper provided a qualitative look at non-custodial African American fathers' constructs of fatherhood, and how they struggle to fulfill their definition of a fathering role. A common theme in Edin's interviews with urban fathers was the significant impact fatherhood

had on their lives. Many fathers saw this experience as life-changing, saving them from the ravages of street life, crime, and drugs, and turning them towards more mainstream activities. They also concurred with basic parental values, wanting their children to do better than they themselves had.

Still, a majority of these men were not able to fulfill their desires to be active and involved fathers. The primary barriers stemmed from difficult relationships with the mothers of their children, and a lack of stable employment and financial resources. Many fathers felt that mothers used various methods to block access to their children and deny them decision-making power or control. Mothers sometimes denied paternity, or insisted on fathers' providing financial support or continuing in a romantic relationship as prerequisites for fathers' access to their children. Extended family members, especially maternal grandmothers of the children, were sometimes key players in controlling fathers' access. Finally, fathers' own behaviors and experiences were also barriers, including drug and alcohol abuse or incarceration. Paternal incarceration often had long-lasting effects on father-child relations because it opened the door for other men to become involved with the mother and child during the father's absence, and often led to truncated paternal employment opportunities henceforth.

Even with the extensive barriers many of these men faced, they still placed great importance on being good fathers to the best of their ability. They wanted to "be there" for their children, and to spend "quality time" with them by taking them to interesting places and buying them things. These types of rather costly activities were important to fathers, but as many of them were inconsistently employed, a lack of money often led to an interrupted ability to fulfill their fathering roles. If fathers were not able to provide consistent financial support, they often bought small but important items such as diapers or sneakers. Nonetheless, many fathers felt

that their children's mothers did not appreciate their efforts. Moreover, many fathers noted the damaging effects of the formal child support system in setting unrealistic support payments and exacerbating problems between parents.

The discussant for this paper, Jerry Tello, focused on two main issues. First, he reiterated the importance of children for fathers, a novel take on the relationship. Just as single mothers have used their children as a reason to face adversity, urban fathers do the same. Even for unmarried, nonresident fathers, children give men a purpose, an anchor in society. Secondly, the discussant commented on gender differences in raising children, the extent to which we raise girls to be caregivers but do not hold the same expectations for boys. If we want boys to grow into loving parents, then we have to teach them how to form and maintain close, caregiving relationships. Both extended families and communities are important influences in this process.

In the general discussion that followed, participants expanded on this concept of supporting boys and men in their development and maintenance of relationship ties. Such support can come from formal support groups, family relationships, or more informal community supports and expectations. Community and family are also important players in creating expectations and cultural norms of father involvement. Community norms do not support fathers' disengagement from their children. Nevertheless, even with supportive community beliefs and individual commitment, many, if not the majority, of low-income urban fathers are not able to fulfill their parenting goals of being highly involved, financially supportive, and close to their children. A seminar participant suggested that this is in part due to the difficulty of familial relationships. There are numerous people involved in raising a child, and often a father's involvement with his child is predicated on his ability to continue a harmonious relationship with the child's mother, grandmother, and others. Thus, to influence paternal

involvement, we must consider all of these relationships and means by which they can be strengthened.

Issues of violence were also raised. Although the Edin paper presented fathers in a positive but thwarted light, the audience was reminded of the disturbing frequency of violence in poor families. Thus, while it is important to consider the meaning and impact of fatherhood on men, we must not forget the impact of men on children and families, and the possibility that men can be negative and destructive as well as positive forces.

*Sandra Hofferth, "Race/ethnic differences in father involvement with young children: A conceptual framework and empirical test in two-parent families"*

*Discussant: Linda Mellgren*

The second paper in this session used a national data set (the Child Development Supplement to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, PSID) to consider differences across racial groups in residential fathers' involvement with their young children. The paper also addressed the impact of urbanicity and economic status, as well as parental attitudes, motivations, skills, and family supports on fathering practices.

The data indicated that Hispanic and Asian fathers show the highest involvement in their children's lives, and African American fathers the lowest. Minority fathers all rate higher on responsibility and lower on warmth than White fathers, and African American and Asian fathers report more control over their children than White fathers, with Hispanics reporting the lowest control. However, many of these differences disappear when other demographic factors such as employment, education, and family structure are controlled. Other important predictors of these paternal behaviors were attitudes, more specifically attitudes concerning gender equity and the role of a father. Fathers who believed that both parents should take responsibility for children

and that fathers are important for children's healthy development engaged in more activities and showed greater responsibility, warmth, and control towards their children.

After summarizing the findings, the discussant, Linda Mellgren, focused on two additional issues of importance in measuring father involvement. The first is the issue of children's conceptualization of the parenting they receive from and the relationship they have with their fathers. Different children may interpret the same paternal behavior in completely different ways. Similarly, the age or developmental stage of the child might influence how appropriate paternal behaviors are or the meaning they hold for children. These concerns reflect a methodological issue raised in Coley's background paper concerning the usefulness of having children and youth self-identify their father or father figure and report on their father-child relationships. Children may be less influenced than mothers by issues such as maternal romantic involvement when nominating a father or discussing his parenting practices.

Secondly, the discussant reflected on the importance of parental attitudes and values. We know very little about the formation of such beliefs, and how community factors such as norms, poverty, or discrimination, as well as intervention or educational programs, might impact parental beliefs.

The main discussion following this paper centered on the relative impact of various types of fathering. Participants debated the importance of the quality of fathering versus simply the presence of fathers, and the importance of fathers' financial and employment contributions versus their actual time and involvement with children. It was suggested that more research attention be devoted to the growing population of single custodial fathers. This group affords an excellent contrast to single mothers and married fathers: do fathers in this situation react

differently than mothers to their children and the stresses of single parenthood? Or are the basics of parenting the same?

## **SESSION 2: SUPPORTS AND BARRIERS TO FATHER INVOLVEMENT**

*Virginia Knox, "Promoting non-custodial parents' involvement with their children: Evidence from the Parents' Fair Share demonstration"*

*Discussant: Ron Mincy*

This paper provided the first quantitative results on the full sample of participants in the Parents' Fair Share Demonstration (PFS), a multi-site experimental program designed to increase non-custodial fathers' employment and earnings, payment of child support, and other involvement with their children. Non-custodial parents (almost always fathers) were eligible for the program if they were behind in their child support payments due to unemployment or underemployment and if their children were receiving welfare. The main components of the program included education and employment services, enhanced child support services, peer support groups, and parent mediation services.

Findings presented in Knox's paper indicated that the program increased the number of fathers paying formal child support, and also led to a moderate increase in the average amount of child support paid through the formal system. However, it also led to a reduction in the average amount of informal support provided, although no significant change was noted in the proportion of fathers who provided informal support. Taken together, these changes resulted in an insignificant alteration in total financial support provided by fathers.

With regards to paternal involvement, no difference was noted in fathers' contact with their children following their entry into PFS. It seemed that this was due not to a lack of effort or

desire to see their children. Indeed, their efforts to see and parent their children did increase. Rather, the increased efforts by fathers were often not welcomed by mothers, and thus parental disagreements increased. Relatedly, participants rarely used the parent mediation portion of the PFS program, and so its effectiveness was not adequately tested. Finally, numerous important subgroup differences were noted. For example, the program seemed to have the greatest effect on fathers of very young children and parents who had been separated for a relatively short period.

Together, these results imply lessons for future intervention and policy efforts. First, it is important to attend to the trade-offs and possible negative effects of a policy seeking to increase compliance with the formal child support system. Not surprisingly, in families in which fathers contribute substantial resources through informal means, and especially for very low-income fathers, increases in formal payments can occur at the expense of informal contributions. Second, the results point to the need to forge a better understanding of family relationships and myriad types of paternal involvement and contributions to inform future intervention efforts.

Ron Mincy, the discussant, focused on putting these results into context, considering other intervention efforts and current public policy initiatives. The PFS is the third major multi-site demonstration on fatherhood, and makes numerous contributions, such as distinguishing formal from informal child support payments. The demonstration also provides important new policy options. For example, a very successful aspect of the program was the weeding out process of determining which fathers were truly unable to pay their child support due to a lack of adequate employment, and which were simply skirting their financial duty. In addition, the program's experiences indicated the difficulty in relying on extant programs and services to

serve clients. PFS relied upon employment services in the community, and results indicated that the majority of fathers in the program received insufficient and low-quality employment aid.

The discussant also considered methodological issues of data collection and resulting biases. For example, the PFS demonstration relied upon administrative records to measure formal child support payments, but on mother report data to measure informal support. In this case, using mother rather than father report data may have been the best choice, given that fathers in the experimental group might be expected to show some bias in their reports to satisfy expectations and pressures from the program itself. This point parallels one of the most important lessons from the PFS report, that this program appeared to be successful in increasing fathers' *desires* to be involved in their children's lives, but did not similarly increase their opportunities or abilities to be highly involved. In contrast to fathers, mothers did not show a similar change in attitude, and this appeared to lead to increased parental conflict. This underscores the importance of working with both parents in future intervention efforts.

In a similar vein, the findings indicate the complexities of parental relationships and the importance of more carefully considering new parents' relationship status to help determine how policies and programs can support, rather than undermine, relationship growth. "Visiting partnerships" is a term used to denote parents who are not coresiding, but who nonetheless are working together to promote the well-being of their child. How can policies help to nurture such partnerships for the well-being of both the child and of the parents? Do current child support policies initiate discord and separation of such partnerships, rather than supporting their continued development?

Participants actively expanded on these issues and raised further questions. For example, how do we determine the relative value of different types of father involvement, and thus

priorities for policy? If current child support policies do indeed initiate discord and decrease informal support, to what extent should these policies be altered? What is relatively more important, formal support, informal support, or nonfinancial father involvement? Currently, research cannot adequately answer these questions. While there is significant evidence of the positive impacts of formal child support, research has not adequately measured the effects of informal support and other types of involvement. What about the long term, is formal child support more likely to last through prolonged parental separation as opposed to informal support, which may be more dependent on the closeness or civility of the parental relationship? As one participant pointed out, the two systems may be entwined in more complex ways as well. For example, research indicates that mothers may use the formal child support system as a bargaining tool with nonresidential fathers, threatening to engage the formal system if the father does not stay in contact with and provide financial support to his child.

Discussion also focused on explaining the details of the new child support and welfare rules. Enforcement and child support orders are stricter and proportionately higher for low-income versus middle- and high-income families. Previous welfare laws stated that up to \$50 of formal child support payments would be passed on to a mother on welfare; the remainder would go to the state to pay back the welfare costs. New federal laws, however, do not contain this mandate, and only a minority of states passes any of the child support money on to welfare mothers. This issue has generated significant debate among policy makers and researchers, with many questioning the effects of these laws on pushing parents out of the formal system and into informal, unregulated payments. Many in the audience agreed that new child support rules and enforcement may have detrimental effects on low-income families.

Finally, the discussion turned to issues concerning non-biological father-figures. In the national debates promoting father involvement with children, there is an assumption that biological fathers are the best male resources for children. However, when we talk about urban, minority, or low-income men, this attitude wavers. What about incarcerated fathers, or fathers who are addicted to alcohol or drugs? Will policy ever get to a point of defining priorities around parental figures instead of emphasizing attachments with biological parents? While many thought that this scenario was unlikely, this question is more prescient for practitioners. Programs face critical decisions concerning the division of resources devoted to promoting male involvement. Should they focus their energies on recovering biological fathers who have disengaged from their children, or concentrate on building male-child relationships, attempting to work with the most available and reliable men, regardless of status? One way to make these decisions, proposed a participant, is to look at the ultimate goals and priorities of the program. Are they to promote family stability? Or to support optimal child development? Another possible solution is to take a two-pronged approach with short and long term perspectives. For the short term, promoting mentoring relationships for children without close relationships to their biological fathers will provide needed supports. At the same time, trying to reintegrate disengaged fathers can be a longer term goal.

*John Love, "Dads in context: Early experiences of fatherhood, parenting, and program involvement in Early Head Start"*

*Discussant: Lisbeth Schorr*

In a second intervention report, John Love and colleagues described the early progress of the fatherhood component of the Early Head Start (EHS) Research and Evaluation Project, a multi-method study of the implementation and effectiveness of 17 EHS programs around the

country which serve infants and toddlers and their parents from low-income families. The evaluation of the program has as its core a random assignment design with 3,000 families. The fatherhood component, a substudy within this overall evaluation, has two major goals: (1) to increase our understanding of how low-income fathers experience fatherhood and how they influence the healthy development of their young children, and (2) to document the means and effectiveness of the EHS programs in engaging fathers in program involvement. There are four types of studies involved in the fatherhood research program: a longitudinal survey study of 1,000 fathers of 2-3 year olds including a substudy with observational data; a more intensive longitudinal survey of 200 fathers of newborns, following fathers and children from the child's birth until age 3; a practitioners study which considers the strategies and effectiveness of EHS programs' engagement with fathers; and a number of small local research studies.

Taken together, the fatherhood studies of the EHS evaluation are likely to provide a remarkable increase in our knowledge of low-income fathers of young children. To date, however, only very preliminary information is available on the characteristics of the fathers of EHS children (by maternal report) and on program staff's experiences with program implementation and father involvement. Maternal report data from almost 1,500 study families indicate that nearly all focal children (86%) have a man who is involved in their lives in a father-like role. About three quarters are biological fathers, approximately two thirds have at least a high school education, and about three fourths are employed.

Information on father participation in the programs was provided by program directors, who generated several general guidelines to increase paternal participation. These include using gender-inclusive language and fathers' names on materials, including men in home visits and modifying schedules so that they can more easily attend program-based events, using surveys,

and using more male staff in father-related programs. In short, by utilizing innovative approaches, a program can become more family focused rather than simply mother-child focused.

Focus group information added to these findings, indicating that staff saw a significant need for supportive services for fathers. On the other hand, many fathers asserted that they wished to prove themselves as capable fathers on their own merits, although they also admitted to significant personal barriers to responsible fathering, including immaturity and a lack of time, energy, transportation, and financial resources. Fathers wished to provide financially for their children and to “be there” for them emotionally and physically. Men claimed a significant amount of satisfaction and development from their paternal experiences, indicating that parenthood had played a central role in their maturity and growth.

The discussant, Lisbeth Schorr, expressed disappointment in the scope of the findings and program suggestions, claiming that the authors were thinking “too small” in their policy and programmatic implications. Programs that have been shown to work have been highly strategic and intensive, whereas the fatherhood component of the EHS appears to be on a completely different level. Overall, this research program is more about generating basic information on low-income fathers’ lives and parenting behavior than about providing an intensive intervention program directed at significantly altering the life course of many of these children and families. And it is the later goal, the discussant claimed, that is central and most important.

Secondly, the discussant questioned whether and how the findings from various pieces of the study would be used to inform each other. For example, fathers shared their views on what aspects of their lives and their environments presented barriers to their provision of fathering to their children. Yet, the EHS programs did not seem to be working to address these barriers when

providing services. This is the type of information that is sorely missing in research and program development, and EHS has the possibility of building a truly iterative and interactive process of information collection, feedback, and program response.

Thirdly, the discussant referred back to earlier discussions, focusing on the benefits fathers claimed from their fathering role. A focal issue, she stated, is how programs can channel these positive feelings into responsible action on the part of fathers. That is, how can programs develop structured interventions which encourage fathers to provide consistent love and support *to* their children, instead of simply taking these things *from* them? In general, within this evaluation and in related evaluation research, more thought should be given to the goals the programs are trying to achieve, and to how the interventions can be tied more clearly and specifically to these goals.

Participants actively debated the discussant's comments concerning the lack of cohesion and strategy in the EHS program and evaluation. Many in the audience pointed out that fatherhood intervention is in its infancy as a field, and little is known about best practices for involving or influencing low-income fathers. In addition to Head Start programs, a plethora of other child or family services and programs across the country have just begun emphasizing the inclusion of fathers. Coherent training programs for helping services engage and serve fathers are just starting up. Thus, focusing on initiating and sustaining father involvement in programs which previously served only children and mothers, such as EHS, actually appears to be a reasonable first step. Nonetheless, while actively including fathers is a valid goal for many family services, this does not imply that each program needs to directly address every potential issue in family's lives. Rather, programs need to develop systems for strengthening links between various services and networks to aid families in accessing the supports they need.

### **SESSION 3: FATHERS' INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN'S HEALTH AND WELL BEING**

*Frank Furstenberg, "Paternal involvement and children's health: A longitudinal study"*

*Discussant: Ron Ferguson*

The third and final session of the seminar focused on fathers' impacts on their children. The first paper presented an updated view of the children of the Baltimore Study, a study originally begun in the 1960s as an adolescent mother program evaluation. The children of these mothers are now entering their 30s, and longitudinal data are available concerning family relationships and child health and development throughout their lives. In this study, Furstenberg considered links between father presence, residence, and relationship with children during childhood and adolescence, and physical and mental health functioning in early adulthood.

For children in the Baltimore Study, the modal experience with fathers was sporadic coresidence. Only about 10% lived with their biological father throughout childhood, slightly fewer lived with a stepfather for this time, and many of the remainder lived with their biological father, a father-figure, or a succession of more than one man for a portion of their youth. Youth reported on their closeness to their father during adolescence, and at young adulthood reported their physical and mental health and depressive symptomatology.

Results indicated few links between father presence or absence during childhood and physical or mental health at young adulthood. Long term coresidence with a father or father-figure during childhood was linked with lower levels of depression in youth adulthood. On the other hand, short term coresidence during adolescence predicted worse adult reports of mental health, especially for girls. No results were found for physical health. The study also included a measure of child-father closeness. The closeness of the relationship accounted for a small

proportion of the effects of father presence or absence, and had significant direct links to young adult functioning, predicting better physical and mental health.

In his comments, Ron Ferguson focused on the contrast between father-child closeness and father residency, with the former being more important than the later. Furthermore, he considered the distinction between parental closeness that resembles a peer-like closeness, versus parental behaviors such as holding children accountable. Results from the Furstenberg paper indicate that closeness is important for later mental health functioning. On the other hand, other research finds that parental demands of children are important for school achievement. Thus, these two types of parent-child relationships-- peer-like closeness and parental demands of children-- are to an extent at odds. What are the trade-offs involved here, and how can this issue be applied to intervention programs and other services for youth and families? The discussant's points indicated a need to encourage fathers to cultivate both areas of their relationships with their children, closeness and demandingness.

From these comments, the discussion extended into practical considerations for encouraging active father involvement in urban communities. Some of the major concerns voiced were safety, the availability of space and resources for activities, and fathers' feelings that they are welcomed as part of child- or family-based programs. Contrary to middle-class suburban communities, urban neighborhoods often lack safe public places with adequate equipment and resources to foster active father-child activities (such as sports leagues, picnicking, etc.). While these issues are pressing in many urban areas, many believed that their resolution would not necessarily be enough to encourage closer or more active father-child relationships, due in part to fathers' own unmet needs. As one participant pointed out, many

urban minority fathers need their own programs and services in order to be able to act successfully as a healthy support for their children.

Another line of discussion concerned relationship disruptions and later functioning. Some posited attachment theory, that is that close and consistent relationships during infancy are necessary for the development of a healthy sense of self and later psychological health. Thus, later relationship fluctuations should have less impact than early disruptions. Others argued for explanations consistent with the paper findings, considering the impact of later relationship disturbances, especially during adolescence, on long-term negative consequences. There are numerous hypotheses to explain such a link. One focuses on psychological stresses from the loss of a supportive and loving relationship. A second explanation concerns the loss of practical supports. After a family disruption during adolescence, young adults will not have a stable family support system for material and practical aid. The author, Frank Furstenberg, argued for a third possibility, that father removal during adolescence signifies more general family instability, in which fathers are often pitted against other members of the family. Thus, it is not only the father-child relationship that one must be concerned about, but also the father's relationship with the mother, grandmother, and others who might have power over a father's access to his children. Both of the later two hypotheses argue for a family systems perspective in which one must consider not only the father-child link, but also how other family members might prohibit, support, or make up for this relationship.

*Julien Teitler, "Father involvement, child health and maternal health behavior"*

*Discussant: James May*

The final paper in this session continued with the trajectory of fathers' influence on children's health by looking at these relationships around the time of the child's birth. This paper

discussed a subsample of early data from the Fragile Families study, a national randomized sample of primarily unmarried parents residing in large cities. This subsample is primarily Hispanic, unmarried, and low income. Findings indicated that among the sample of couples in which both partners were interviewed, father involvement was linked to higher birthweights for babies, and more healthy prenatal behaviors (accessing prenatal care and abstaining from drugs, alcohol, and cigarettes) for mothers. More specifically, having a father/partner who is married, cohabiting, or contributing financially predicted better outcomes on nearly all these indicators of baby and mother well-being. Fathers who visited at the hospital, those who signed the birth certificate, and those who intended to help raise their children also had partners with better health behaviors during pregnancy.

These findings were relatively consistent whether using either father or mother reports of fathering behaviors. However, when mother report information on the least involved fathers was included, those who refused to participate in the study, or when only the noncohabiting couples were considered, many of these results became insignificant. Thus, the most significant results appeared to be marriage effects: married women had healthier pregnancies and healthier babies than unmarried women in this sample. Analyses also considered interaction effects between father involvement and behaviors, and found that paternal drug and alcohol problems were linked with poor maternal health behaviors most strongly when the couple coresided.

The author concluded that only very weak support was found for the importance of paternal involvement on child and mother health outcomes during pregnancy and birth. These weak results may be due to a relatively small sample, or more likely to highly skewed involvement variables. That is, the great majority of fathers in this subsample were considered

highly involved during this early period. Questions remain concerning how successful these fathers will be at continuing such a high level of involvement as their children grow.

The discussant for this paper, James May, reflected on his own extensive experience working with fathers and children's health issues. He stated that he has encountered a preponderance of men who strive to be responsible and caring fathers in the face of great difficulty and often discouragement. Many of the discussant's comments focused on the importance of capitalizing on fathers' desires to be highly involved and active parents, especially around the time of their child's birth and during the initial years following. Even for unmarried parents, most fathers wish and try to be involved with their children. However, public policies and supportive programs have failed to capitalize on these desires. In particular, the discussant focused on three issues that policies and programs have failed to adequately address. First, the important issue of employment: jobless men often lack the self-esteem or personal resources to be positive, active parents. Second, the invisibility of fathers in health care and social service settings: in the majority of these settings, fathers feel invisible and unacknowledged. And third, the beliefs of many health and service personnel that fathers are hostile and difficult to work with: many men feel like no one trusts or acknowledges their efforts at being involved fathers.

In the general discussion, focus returned to broader issues of measuring the impact of father involvement on children. While there is currently somewhat weak support for the contention that urban fathers influence children in consistent and positive ways, some cautioned that the research to date is too sparse and constructs are too poorly measured to make a fair judgement on this topic. It was suggested that future work needs to address more clearly specific domains of child development, and needs to acknowledge that fathers can be negative as well as positive influences.

Another participant suggested that a more appropriate question might be whether fathers *could* have more significant impacts on children, if systems were set up to better encourage and support healthy father involvement. A number of specific suggestions were generated for more productive efforts to support father engagement. First, supportive programs might do well to start off with information gathering in order to determine the areas in which men believe they are most influential to their children, and the areas within which they would like support or guidance. Second, programs need to work with both mothers and fathers to attempt to influence the attitudes and behaviors of each regarding father involvement. Third, programs should be led by men, both participants and professionals, and should include peer support components and links to other services such as job training.

## **LOOKING AHEAD**

Participants in the Urban Seminar on Fatherhood concluded the seminar with a renewed commitment to combining insights from research, practice, and policy in an effort to improve the efficacy and knowledge of all of these efforts. Although there is much to be learned concerning the impact of urban fathers on their children and how policies and programs can influence the role of fathers in families, all participants believed that trying to improve and increase father-child relationships is a worthy goal and one which presents a challenge for communities and scientists alike.