



Consortium Connections, Fall 1994

Children, Youth and Family Consortium  
University of Minnesota, University Gateway, 270A, 200 Oak Street SE, Minneapolis MN 55455 PHONE (612) 626  
1212  
EMAIL: [cyfcec@maroon.tc.umn.edu](mailto:cyfcec@maroon.tc.umn.edu)

Minnesota Children, Youth and Family Consortium Electronic Clearinghouse Permission is granted to create and distribute copies of this document for noncommercial purposes provided that the author and MN CYFCEC receive acknowledgment and this notice is included. PHONE (612) 626-1212 EMAIL: [cyfcec@maroon.tc.umn.edu](mailto:cyfcec@maroon.tc.umn.edu)

Consortium Connections is published three times a year (Winter, Spring and Fall) by the Children, Youth and Family Consortium: A University and Community Collaboration.

In This Issue - The Role of Men in Children's Lives

On July 11, 1,000 program leaders, researchers and policy makers gathered in Nashville, Tennessee for Family Reunion III: the Role of Men in Children's Lives. The third of a series of family policy conferences hosted by Vice President Al Gore, this year's conference was sponsored by the Consortium in partnership with the Tennessee Department of Human Services. The purpose of the conference was to explore factors that support or hinder men's involvement in the lives of children, to share effective strategies for engaging men more positively, and to identify related policy issues. To give you a sampling of the ideas that emerged from the conference, we have asked some participants to share their observations and experiences. Dwaine Simms of MELD challenges some stereotypes about so-called "deadbeat dads." Oliver Williams, a professor in the School of Social Work, calls us to confront domestic abuse and recognize issues that it raises related to father involvement. As an example of effective father involvement strategies, Ed Pitt, director of the Male Involvement Project at the Families and Work Institute in New York, describes the work of his organization in Minnesota and other parts of the country. And Neil Tift of the Father's Resource Center summarizes issues and insights both from the conference and from preconference activities in which he participated.

For further exploration of these issues, look into FatherNet on the Consortium Electronic Clearinghouse, a rapidly-growing collection of resources and ideas on this critical topic. If you join Vice President Gore and others in a conversation on FatherNet's electronic bulletin board, your ideas can help shape the national Father to Father Initiative that is being developed as a follow-up to Family Reunion III.

DEADBEAT DADS - Another Voice for Another Label Dwaine Simms, Program Replication Manager, MELD for Young Dads Program

Labels are necessary. They help us to make sure that we don't confuse things that are similar. Ever mix paprika in your oatmeal thinking it was cinnamon? However, some labels should be viewed in another way. For example the term "deadbeat dads" is often given to men who won't pay child support, men who elude the system that requires them to take responsibility for their children. The label has been extended to too many fathers who shouldn't come under its characteristics and stereotypes. Let's look more closely at an individual case:

Minneapolis Man is a twenty-eight year old father of a brand new baby girl. Less than an hour after Baby Girl was born, the mother was heard saying how much she wanted to "get out from under the responsibility of being a mother, I am not ready for this." Two weeks later she is telling the father that it's his baby and he should take care of her . . . "after all I've got another kid anyway." Father takes care of Baby Girl for months. He tries to access the AFDC system for support for himself and his daughter. Ramsey county tells him that while he has a legal right to file for paternity and seek support from the mother, that the system just isn't set up for him. The Ramsey County attorney's office suggests that he return the baby to the mother saying "It's in the Baby Girl's and your best interest." Less than seventy-two hours after doing this, the mother has the infant committed to St. Joe's for foster care placement.

This Minneapolis man is not a deadbeat dad. Working for a national parenting information and support organization - MELD - which has served over a thousand young fathers and dads to be, we've seen the inequity of labeling as deadbeats young fathers who are out of the labor force, out of school, out of hope, and have little life expectancy beyond 25.

According to a Ford Foundation economist, there are ten million noncustodial fathers in the U.S. who don't pay the entire amount of child support they owe. Of these, only 21 percent were unable to meet the terms of their child support because they were poor. Of the fathers that pay no child support at all, only 30 percent fail to do so because they can't afford to. This means that there are fathers who don't pay child support and can afford to. It also means that there are millions of fathers that want to support their children and cannot. There is little similarity between these two communities of fathers. Child support policy attempts to cover both, but is ineffective.

Author Bryan Robinson wrote that over 90 percent of teenage fathers want to pay financial support, nearly 90 percent want to participate in the care of their children, 96 percent attempt to maintain close contact with mother and child, 80 percent want to learn more about how to care for a baby, 75 percent were actually finding ways to

provide financial support for their children, over 80 percent helped in other ways, and despite some outdated hospital policies about father involvement in the birthing process, one in four teen dads were there when the baby was born.

Let's not continue to beat down fathers with unfair labels. Instead let's beat down barriers that keep fathers away from caring for their children.

Partner Abuse and Fatherhood: Some Considerations Oliver Williams, Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, University of Minnesota

Concern over what prevents men from fulfilling their role as fathers was a topic explored at Family Reunion III. The CYF Consortium co-sponsored the event and assisted in assembling a group of learned respondents in the field of fatherhood.

Forum respondents shared insights concerning what they believed prevented men from being better fathers. Among the themes to emerge were the erosion of marriage as a norm in the U.S.; legal and national policies that are not gender neutral and may be male hostile; and the lack of male parental role models for teenage males.

Another topic which received some attention was the issue of partner abuse. It is essential that Americans understand the effect that partner abuse has on families and on fatherhood. Such insight frames the context for considering the other themes.

For example, two-parent families have more potential resources and other kinds of support for children. Higher divorce rates may be due to different societal norms than in the past, but too often couples separate or divorce due to physical and emotional victimization of one partner and/or the children. A partner may leave the relationship not due to moral decay, but because she or the children are not safe. The battered women's movement helped to confront the conventional wisdom of the past that tacitly condoned violence against women. In the past, women were encouraged to stay in abusive relationships; today they are encouraged to find safety and shelter. In the past, women were encouraged to believe they could change the man who batters; today many women recognize he has to change himself.

Men who batter are usually attempting to control their partner by using any means necessary, including the children, the legal system, etc. It is important to recognize that non-abusive men find themselves in conflict during divorce or custody disputes too. However, in the debate on national policy, it is important not to lose sight of the experiences of battered women. If national policy was shaped to protect battered women and children, reduce partner abuse and encourage healthy relationships, a byproduct might be fewer divorces and longer lasting marriages.

The discussion of role models often centers on the absent father. But what if the father is abusive and present? Two accounts from battered women have shaped my perspective on this theme. In the first, a woman noted that her husband and her son had a very strong relationship. In many ways, her husband was a great father. However, after a severe beating her five year old son told her, "Mommy, if you just did what daddy told you to do, he wouldn't have to hit you." The impact of this negative role model is evident. How is this child learning to view women and relationships? How is he learning to resolve conflict with a loved one?

In the second case, a battered woman, who had been divorced from the abusive ex-husband for about a year, reported the following:

He called me up saying he was jealous and enraged over my relationship with my boyfriend of six months. My ex-husband threatened me saying, "If I ever see you two together, I will kill you." Within a half-hour my ex-husband came to my home and shot our daughter and my boyfriend. They survived the assault, but later I asked my daughter, "'Knowing that your father had a gun, why did you stay in the house?' My daughter's reply was, 'I remember the last time you got beat up! I didn't help you! I promised if this ever happened to you again I was going to help you!'"

Children exposed to domestic violence get hurt and learn negative messages about relationships and resolving conflict.

In conclusion, the issue of domestic violence has a real impact on restricting the gifts of fatherhood. Although not all men are violent, a significant number of women are physically and emotionally abused by their partners. Partner abuse plays a major role in the divorce rates, and has perpetuated into an intergenerational cycle of violence in this country. We must address this issue so the debate over what prevents men from being good fathers has more balance. Not all fathers are villains, but at the same time not all fathers are heroes. The question we now ask is how do we improve the odds of making more fathers heroes?

Minnesota Higher Education Center Against Violence & Abuse by Jeffrey L. Edleson, Professor of Social Work and Center Co-Chair

---

[Return to the CYFC Home Page](#)