

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 906

PS 029 605

AUTHOR Kane, Danielle C.; Gadsden, Vivian L.; Armorer, Keisha R.
TITLE The Fathers and Families Core Learnings: An Update from the Field.
INSTITUTION Pennsylvania Univ., Philadelphia. National Center on Fathers and Families.
SPONS AGENCY Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD.; Ford Foundation, New York, NY.; Mott (C.S.) Foundation, Flint, MI.
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 45p.
AVAILABLE FROM National Center on Fathers and Families, University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education, 3440 Market Street, Suite 450, Philadelphia, PA 19104-3325. Tel: 215-573-5500; Fax: 215-573-5508; e-mail: mailbox@ncoff.gse.upenn.edu; Web site: <http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu>.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Rearing; Employed Parents; *Family (Sociological Unit); *Fathers; Focus Groups; *Parent Child Relationship; Parent Education; Parent Role; Social Services; Unemployment
IDENTIFIERS Barriers to Participation; Coparenting; Intergenerational Continuity; Intergenerational Transmission; Role Transition

ABSTRACT

The mission of the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) is to improve the life chances and well-being of children and the efficacy of families by facilitating the positive involvement of fathers. Seven core learnings, developed in 1994, are at the heart of NCOFF's agenda for research, practice, and policy, and a framework for the field. These seven core learnings address the following areas: (1) fathers regard for their children; (2) the impact of father presence; (3) joblessness; (4) systemic barriers to father involvement; (5) co-parenting; (6) role transitions; and (7) intergenerational issues. The NCOFF used focus groups to examine the behaviors/activities necessary for being a good father and how many fathers actually meet the criteria. In addition, the NCOFF met with individuals in the field to determine whether and how the core learnings continue to resonate with practice and whether new core learnings should be added. This report, presented in four sections, summarizes the results of six focus group meetings with practitioners. Section 1 deals with modifications to the original core learnings. Section 2 examines new themes that the focus group participants believed should be incorporated into new core learnings. Section 3 considers the role of policy and research in supporting programs and practice. Section 4 argues that finding ways of increasing people's options will enable them to become more active parents. This section also presents the hypotheses for the new core learnings. The report's two appendices contain the focus group meeting discussion guide and a list of the programs and agencies represented at the focus groups. (KB)

PS 029605

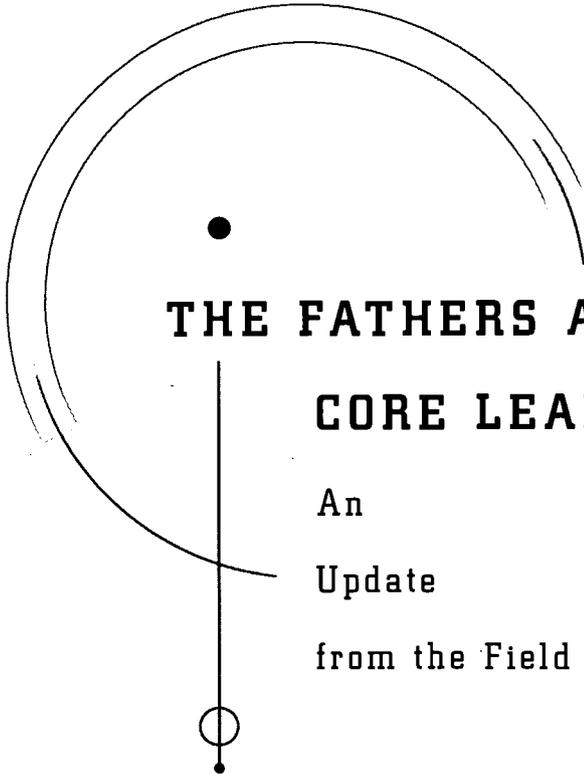
THE FATHERS AND FAMILIES CORE LEARNINGS

An
Update
from the Field

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
 This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.
 Minor changes have been made to
improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this
document do not necessarily represent
official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS
BEEN GRANTED BY
Susan Haider
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
1





THE FATHERS AND FAMILIES

CORE LEARNINGS

An
Update
from the Field

Danielle C. Kane
Vivian L. Gadsden
Keisha H. Armorer



SEVEN CORE LEARNINGS

- 1 Fathers care—even if that caring is not shown in conventional ways.
- 2 Father presence matters—in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development.
- 3 Joblessness is a major impediment to family formation and father involvement.
- 4 Existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment operate to create obstacles and disincentives to father involvement. The disincentives are sufficiently compelling as to have prompted the emergence of a phenomenon dubbed “underground fathers”—men who acknowledge paternity and are involved in the lives of their children but who refuse to participate as fathers in the formal systems.
- 5 A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the vital skills to share the responsibility for parenting.
- 6 The transition from biological father to committed parent has significant development implications for young fathers.
- 7 The behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices within families of origin.

The seven Core Learnings are at the heart of NCOFF’s agenda for research, practice, and policy and a framework for the field. They represent the knowledge and experience of practitioners who confront complex problems facing fathers and families and are consistent with research across multiple disciplines. They offer an important lens through which policymakers might learn more about the implications and impact of legislation and policy decisions on the lives of large numbers of fathers, mothers, children, and families. Within them are captured salient issues experienced and felt deeply by a range of fathers and families—from those who are financially secure to those who are the most vulnerable to poverty and hardship.

The Core Learnings were identified immediately prior to NCOFF’s inception by frontline practitioners in a series of survey and focus group activities conducted by the Philadelphia Children’s Network and NCOFF. Formulated first as seven hypotheses drawn from practitioners’ experiences in programs serving fathers and families, each hypothesis was tested against existing published research and policy studies. As each hypothesis was borne out in the literature, it became a Core Learning. A library of information was developed for each. The resultant seven libraries now constitute the NCOFF FatherLit Research Database and include over 7,000 citations, annotations, and abstracts of research, available in written, diskette, CD, and electronic form (forthcoming).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Preface	VIII
	Acknowledgments	IV
•	Introduction	1
••	The Original Seven Core Learnings: Recent Perspectives from the Field	5
•••	Practitioner Hypotheses and Recommendations: Issues for New Core Learnings	19
••••	How Policy and Research Can Support Programs, Practice, and Families	25
•••••	Exercising the Option of Fatherhood: Crafting a Forward-Thinking Agenda	27
•	Appendix A: Focus Group Meeting Discussion Guide	29
•	Appendix B: Programs and Agencies Represented at Focus Groups	30

MISSION

The mission of the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) is to improve the life chances and well-being of children and the efficacy of families by facilitating the positive involvement of fathers. NCOFF aims to achieve this mission by promoting the conduct and dissemination of sound basic, applied, and policy research that examines critically issues in the seven Core Learnings and related work and that can contribute to social change. Developed in the spirit of the Philadelphia Children's Network's (PCN) motto, "Help the children. Fix the system.", NCOFF seeks to increase and enrich the possibilities for children, particularly those most vulnerable to hardship and poverty. NCOFF shares with PCN the premises that children need loving, nurturing families; that families need support in providing nurturance; and that a critical component of support includes increasing the ability of fathers, mothers, and other adults to contribute to children's social, emotional, and cognitive development.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

What behaviors or activities are necessary for being a good father, and how many fathers actually meet the criteria? These are just two of a number of fundamental questions raised by family practitioners participating in seven focus groups conducted by the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) from August through December 1996. Similar meetings were held by the Philadelphia Children's Network and NCOFF prior to and shortly after NCOFF's establishment in July 1994 to identify themes in frontline practice that should be examined more deeply in research and policy.

Two years later, NCOFF's staff again met with individuals working in the field to determine (1) whether the original Core Learnings identified in 1994 remain relevant, (2) what new issues are emerging from the original Core Learnings, and (3) whether additional Learnings should be included. NCOFF also sought reactions to recent public policy initiatives, such as welfare reform, that affect parents and children served in programs. This report describes the responses and commentaries of the focus group participants.

NCOFF initiated the focus group series as part of a three-phase effort to determine whether and how the Core Learnings continue to resonate with practice and whether new Core Learnings should be added. In this report, we summarize what we have learned from revisiting some of the practitioners who helped to formulate the original Core Learnings and from meeting with others who are now part of the growing network of family specialists. Held in six sites throughout the country, the focus group meetings were intended to explore how practice and programs have changed in the past two years, what practitioners have learned from their work that coheres with or differs from their previous learnings and experiences with fathers and families, and how research and policy can support the development of effective approaches for the field.

The report is divided into four sections. The first section deals with modifications to the original Core Learnings. The second section examines new themes that participants believed should be incorporated into new Core Learnings. In the third section, the role of policy and research in supporting programs and practice is considered. Finally, general comments about the focus group discussions are considered. Below are some of the more important points raised during the focus group meetings.

Major Themes in the Discussion of Fathers Care

- It is necessary to determine standards for what constitutes a good father.
- It is necessary to estimate how many fathers meet these standards.
- There are often discrepancies between the standards that practitioners envision for good fathering and those envisioned by researchers.

Major Themes in the Discussion of Father Presence Matters

- Many children want their fathers to be involved in their lives and stand to benefit from positive father involvement.
- Cultural variations in fathering standards complicate attempts to define good fathering.
- Father presence matters differently for boys and girls.

Major Themes in the Discussion of Employment and Joblessness

- Fathers' attitudes toward joblessness (and work) may play a larger role in their family involvement than joblessness in itself.
- Poor quality education is often a contributing factor in joblessness, particularly within intergenerationally poor families and poor families of color.
- The significance of employment (and employment decisions) to father involvement should be stated explicitly in this Core Learning.

Major Themes in the Discussion of Systemic Barriers

- Some barriers are more relevant to certain kinds of fathers.
- Barriers to involvement can include components of public policy as well as societal messages or individual dispositions; the Core Learning should capture this complexity.
- Contemporary approaches to child support make no allowance for nonfinancial support, which penalizes poor fathers in particular.

Major Themes in the Discussion of Co-Parenting

- This Core Learning applies to parents of all ages, not just young parents.
- Most people do not know what is involved in being a parent.
- Boys are typically excluded from most childcare training and are thus especially unprepared to cooperate as involved caregivers.

Major Themes in the Discussion of Role Transitions

- The transition to fatherhood is made more complex because boys and men are uninformed about and unprepared for the changes that parenthood brings.
- Age and maturity appear to play a role in how successfully a man will make the transition to fatherhood.
- Education that gives teenagers a realistic portrayal of parenthood should be accompanied by efforts to induce attitude change.

Major Themes in the Discussion of Intergenerational Learning

- Participants view this Core Learning as the bedrock of the other six Learnings; Intergenerational Learning lays the foundation for other aspects of parenting.
- Parents tend to rely on the way they were raised as a model of parenting

- Although participants advocate early education to promote healthy parenting, there is not a consensus about what “healthy” means.

Practitioner Hypotheses: Issues for New Core Learnings

1. Poor schooling and lack of access to educational opportunities limit the employment options of many fathers and contribute to family instability, which threatens children’s well-being and school achievement.
2. Current discussions about father involvement often minimize the significance of the vulnerable situations of many fathers and families, including conditions associated with poverty, drug use, incarceration, and family violence.
3. Many young fathers and families experience isolation and a sense of hopelessness, but the transition to parenthood may provoke a new search for meaning in life.
4. Preparation for the future responsibilities of parenthood and family life should begin early in a child’s life.
5. Encouraging involved fatherhood means moving away from traditional ideals that define manhood in opposition to women and developing models of good fathering.
6. A systematic analysis of programs for fathers will help identify what elements are essential for re-connecting fathers to families.
7. Communities’ cohesiveness and power to set standards is eroding.

How Policy and Research Support Programs, Practice, And Families

There was some support for all policy initiatives discussed. However, most participants focused on the philosophy that guides policy rather than on specific initiatives. Participants agreed that policy should be preventive and child-focused. Participants argued that the system is unfair to poor people who simply do not have sufficient, regular income to make payments but who can contribute, nonetheless, to their children’s well-being. All agreed that the benefits of paternity establishment should be explained to the unmarried couple at the time of birth. Some participants also recommended instituting custody and visitation at the time of paternity establishment.

Practitioners are intimately aware of the awesome responsibilities of guiding clients in their family roles. They look to research to provide an informed, “third-party” perspective that might alleviate some of the pressure they feel. Participants indicated that outcome-based research would be an important alternative resource that would guide them toward helping fathers and families make positive changes. In situations in which their own experience seemed inadequate for the situation, participants envisioned research as a neutral place (with respect to their particular circumstance) to turn for information.

In reference to their own experiences as practitioners, participants set high standards for themselves as well as for the fathers and families in their programs. Many feared, however, that their position of authority in the practitioner-father relationship leads them to create double standards,

i.e., to demand behavior from a father that they themselves may not practice. Others were concerned that practitioners as a group differ significantly on crucial issues and fail to present a unified front to the families served. Still others wanted to know how to address important issues with the few programs available. For instance, several participants asked how to provide a supportive atmosphere for fathers without encouraging them to become dependent on practitioners.

Crafting A Forward-Thinking Agenda: New Themes for the Core Learnings

From the great variety of ideas and opinions expressed in the focus group meetings, NCOFF staff identified several themes which ran through all of the meetings. Some of the most compelling issues seemed to be commonly known realities of service provision to fathers and families. The participants' comments suggested seven specific themes that will be taken into consideration in crafting additional Core Learnings and reworking the text of the current Learnings. These themes are as follows:

1. Education and literacy are vital to enhance fathers' and families' personal development, strengthen employment options, and contribute positively to children's development.
2. The absence of strong models of fatherhood and uninformed perceptions of fatherhood weaken the possibilities for positive father involvement.
3. Fathers and families who have experienced intergenerational hardship and social isolation, particularly those living in conditions of poverty, homelessness, family violence, and incarceration, need a range of social, educational, and human supports to make the transition to committed parents and thriving families.
4. Fathers' beliefs about men's roles, family structure, and family functioning are affected by and affect a variety of cultural practices which differ from group to group and are largely unexplored by the field.
5. The transition to parenthood provides an opportunity for emotional and spiritual growth; many young fathers and mothers find new meaning in life as they struggle to live up to the responsibilities of their new roles.
6. To achieve greater father involvement and responsible parenting, communities and their institutions need to be more assertive in demonstrating their commitment to children's well-being and their support of families.
7. Future and first-time fathers need directed support in preparing to guide children's development within the home, school, and community contexts in which they will live and grow.

Practitioners' experiences have formed and continue to form the basis of much of NCOFF's work. NCOFF has taken a multifaceted approach to bridging the gap between research and practice, including: (1) polling and reporting on the needs and concerns of practitioners, (2) bringing together practitioners with researchers and policymakers to discuss key issues of common interest, (3) encouraging and supporting new practice-focused research efforts, and (4) increasing the accessibility of research to the field.



PREFACE

Father care, father presence, unemployment and joblessness, systemic barriers, cooperative parenting, role transitions, and intergenerational learning: These are the topics of the Core Learnings of the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF). The seven Core Learnings are at the heart of NCOFF's agenda for research, practice, and policy and a framework for the field. They represent the knowledge and experience of practitioners who confront complex problems facing fathers and families and are consistent with research across multiple disciplines. They offer an important lens through which policymakers might learn more about the implications and impact of legislation and policy decisions on the lives of large numbers of fathers, mothers, children, and families. Within them are captured salient issues experienced and felt deeply by a range of fathers and families—from those who are financially secure to those who are the most vulnerable to poverty and hardship.

The Core Learnings were identified immediately prior to NCOFF's inception by frontline practitioners in a series of survey and focus group activities conducted by the Philadelphia Children's Network and NCOFF. Formulated first as seven hypotheses drawn from practitioners' experiences in programs serving fathers and families, each hypothesis was tested against existing published research and policy studies. As each hypothesis was borne out in the literature, it became a Core Learning. A library of information was developed for each. The resultant seven libraries now constitute the NCOFF FatherLit Research Database and include over 7,000 citations, annotations, and abstracts of research, available in written, diskette, CD, and electronic form (forthcoming).

The Core Learnings were formulated, shortly after NCOFF's establishment, first as seven hypotheses drawn from information supplied through a survey of focus groups with practitioners throughout the country. Each hypothesis was then tested against existing research and published reports. As each hypothesis was borne out in the literature, it became a Core Learning, and a library was developed for each. The resultant seven libraries now constitute the NCOFF FatherLit Research Database and include over 7,000 annotations and abstracts of research.

Our assumptions from the outset were that the Core Learnings would be amended over time and that NCOFF's periodic surveys of practice would produce new or additional Learnings. In this report, we summarize what we have learned from revisiting some of the practitioners who helped to formulate the original Core Learnings and from meeting with others who are now part of the growing network of family specialists. Held in six sites throughout the country, the focus group meetings were intended to explore how practice and programs have changed in the past two years, what practitioners have learned from their work that coheres with or differs from their previous learnings and experiences with fathers and families, and how research and policy can support the development of effective approaches for the field.

It was our sense from meetings and conversations with practitioners who participate regularly in NCOFF activities that while the terrain of effort, called family studies, has not shifted considerably, the landscape has changed substantially. Programs serving fathers now have a deeper commitment to and focus on issues such as poverty, ethnic minority status, education and literacy, and community development, while continuing to promote fathers' involvement in the development of their children and support of their families. In particular, welfare reform and policy initiatives at both the federal and state level have resulted in increased public awareness of the problems facing mothers and children and in heightened public sensitivity to the need to involve fathers in families in meaningful, supportive, and nonadversarial ways.

The information about the focus groups described in this report is being used by NCOFF to inform two follow-up activities: (1) a national survey of programs, to be conducted in the Summer

and Fall of 1997, and (2) an ethnography of practitioners, practice, and communities. Like the focus groups, these activities are intended to shed light on the issues, problems, and possibilities embedded in the Core Learnings and to add new Learnings.

The process of reviewing the Core Learnings is ongoing and progressive. The Core Learnings continue to deepen and expand NCOFF's understanding of the practice, knowledge, and policy issues related to fathers and families. They provide both content for innovative, technology-based dissemination efforts to interested practitioners, policymakers, and researchers and the knowledge base needed to create research-initiated, practice-relevant uses of technology. They form a knowledge base for policy recommendations that are rooted in the best information available from research and practice. In addition, they point to areas of knowledge regarding fathers and families that are not well-developed and in which targeted expenditures of research funds can make a substantial impact on practice, policy implementation, and stated knowledge.

We believe that the Core Learnings continue to be a source of information that can promote efforts for, increase knowledge about, and strengthen commitment to families and the field. As a framework, the Core Learnings offer a strong base upon which to build rigorous research and bridges between research and practice. Most importantly, they invite us as researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and vested citizens and community members to interrupt the expected course of events, engage in a more critical discussion, and construct and implement responsive action agendas that reduce the hardship and vulnerability that threaten the well-being of our children and families.

Vivian L. Gadsden
Director



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are indebted to the practitioners, particularly members of the National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families, who gave generously of their time to the focus group meetings and who are unwavering in their commitment to improve the well-being of children. In addition to the authors of this report, Danielle Kane, Vivian Gadsden, and Keisha Armorer, several NCOFF staff members and consultants contributed to the conceptualization of this project, planning for the focus groups, facilitation and documentation of the focus group meetings, and preparation of this report: Wanda Brooks, Michael Coffey, William Cranford, David Fletcher, and Gamine Howe (NCOFF); Scott Coltrane (University of California, Riverside); James Davis (University of Delaware); and Glen Palm (St. Cloud University); and Ramona Thomas (formerly at NCOFF).

We are grateful to the Annie E. Casey Foundation for its core support to NCOFF and to the Charles S. Mott and Ford Foundations for their support of special projects.



INTRODUCTION

Throughout the country, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners grapple with the concept of "fatherhood." This issue is perhaps most immediate for practitioners who serve fathers and families on a daily basis. While these practitioners agree that the definition of fatherhood should extend beyond the traditional emphasis on financial provision, they are sometimes unsure of what the new criteria for being a good father should be. After all, being a good father once meant living with the family and providing for its material needs. This now seems both too much and too little to ask of fathers.

Some fathers have children who rely on public assistance; others have children with teenage mothers whose families do not want their involvement. These fathers are often prevented from living with their children and ensuring their financial support. Yet, these "technically absent" fathers¹ may provide childcare and material support, such as toys or diapers, and show their commitment to maintaining a strong, nurturing relationship with their children. By contrast, some fathers who meet the traditional definition of fatherhood by living in the home and providing for the family's material needs have children who feel unwanted. These examples, which indicate the wide range of father care, lead to important questions, still unanswered in the research literature and by practitioners and policymakers.

What behaviors or activities are necessary for being a good father, and how many fathers actually meet the criteria? These are just two of a number of fundamental questions raised by family practitioners participating in seven focus groups conducted by NCOFF from August through December 1996. Similar meetings were held by NCOFF and the Philadelphia Children's Network shortly after NCOFF's establishment in July 1994 to identify themes in frontline practice that should be examined more deeply in research and policy.

Two years later, NCOFF's staff again met with individuals working in the field to determine (1) whether the original Core Learnings identified in 1994 remain relevant, (2) what new issues are emerging from the original Core Learnings, and (3) whether additional Learnings should be included. NCOFF also sought reactions to recent public policy initiatives, such as welfare reform, that affect parents and children served in programs. This report describes the responses and commentaries of the focus group participants.

Each focus group meeting lasted an average of three hours and was facilitated by an NCOFF staff member and an outside family specialist familiar with programs serving fathers. Meetings were held in six regions of the United States: Atlanta, Georgia²; Austin, Texas; Baltimore, Maryland; Los Angeles, California; Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Two meetings were held in Los Angeles; one meeting was held in each of the other locations.)

A total of 70 participants attended the focus group meetings. Most of the participants were male, and a wide range of experience was represented. Within their organizations, the participants

¹ For a discussion of the "technically present but functionally absent father," see LaRossa, R. (1988). "Fatherhood and social change," *Family Relations*, 37, 451-457.

² This report does not include data from the focus group meeting that took place in Atlanta.

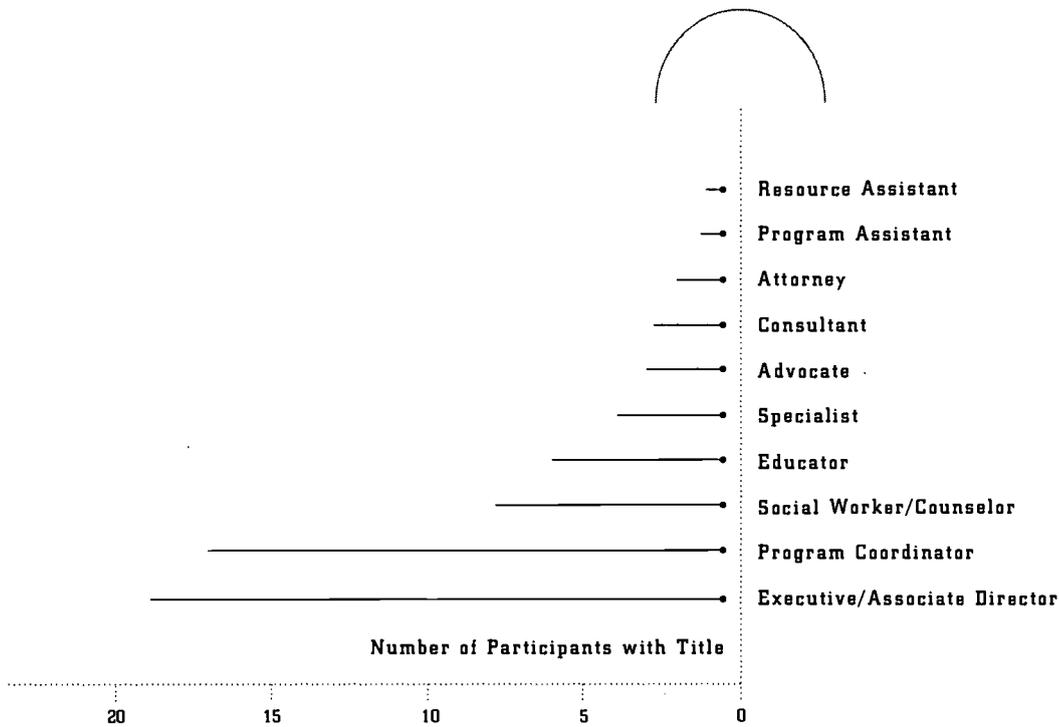


Figure 1: Positions Held by Focus Group Participants in Their Respective Agencies

served as directors, associate directors, program coordinators, social workers, and counselors. (see Figure 1.) Most participants were practitioners who worked directly with clients on a regular basis; other participants supported programs in different capacities, from providing direct assistance such as mentoring to serving as advocates. For example, the two meetings in Los Angeles included advocates from a variety of backgrounds, such as family practice lawyers, practitioner-researchers, and representatives of federal agencies that serve families.

Participants indicated that their programs were designed to accomplish multiple goals. However, most programs were father-focused and established specifically to enhance father involvement in families or to provide support and resources to fathers and other men in general. Programs not catering specifically to fathers typically fell into one of three categories: (1) they offered general parent education services, (2) they were geared toward assisting mothers but included father groups, or (3) they concentrated on giving guidance or aid to parents and children encountering

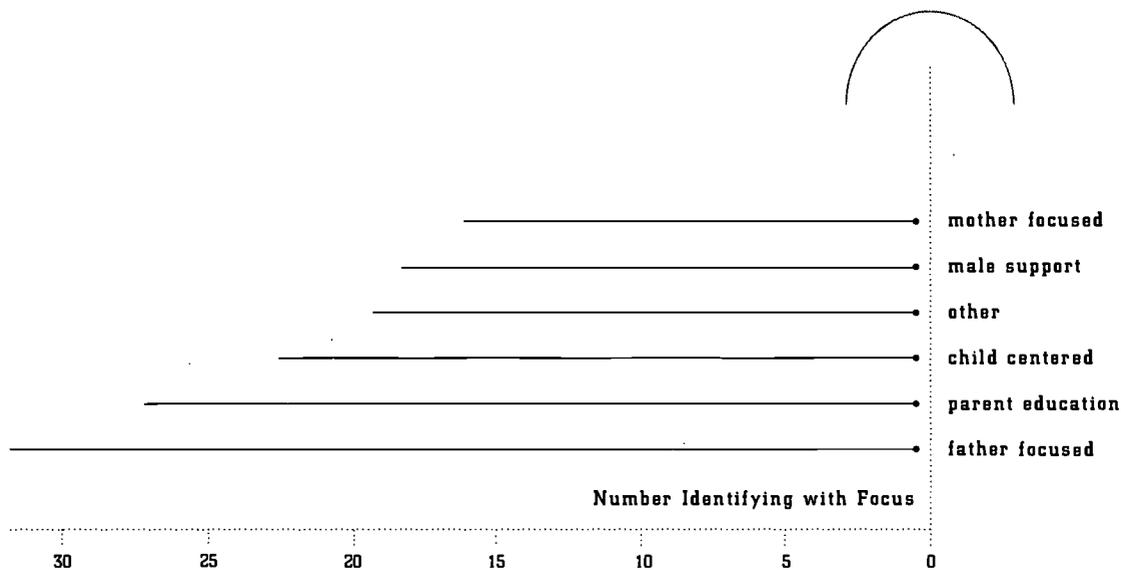


Figure 2: Types of Programs Represented by Focus Group Participants

difficult circumstances (see Figure 2). Programs were funded through public sources, private sources, or both. Roughly half of the programs cited in the report receive only public funding; about one third receive only private funding, and the remaining twenty percent receive both public and private funds.

The populations served by the programs also varied. Programs served a wide range of fathers, including noncustodial, unemployed, low-income, middle-income, single, never married, and divorced fathers; white fathers; and fathers of color. For many clients served by these programs, enrollment was voluntary; however, a small number of programs served only fathers who were mandated by courts to attend.

About this report

This report summarizes the commentaries, describes the experiences, and highlights the issues discussed in six focus group meetings with practitioners. The information from these meetings offers NCOFF and the field, broadly defined, an opportunity to move past simply considering issues to crafting and implementing new and responsive agendas.

This report is not an empirical study but a critical examination of issues that both define and dictate the range and scope of possibilities for many fathers, mothers, and children. As such, it serves as a backdrop for future work in the field and for the next phases of NCOFF's work to identify and deepen our knowledge of practice and the ways that research and policy can help practitioners and communities effect positive change.

This report has four sections. The first section examines the seven original Core Learnings and participants' feedback about the continued importance of these Learnings. (Participants often recommended modifications, in some cases broadening the focus of a Learning, and in others, pinpointing underlying relationships or adding new dimensions.) The second section addresses themes that ran throughout discussions that were not particular to a specific Core Learning. The third section discusses participants' views on how policy and research could serve fathers and families best and sketches a relationship between research and practice that would help meet the goals of each. The concluding section of the report argues that finding ways of increasing people's options will enable them ultimately to become more active parents and presents the hypotheses for new Core Learnings.



THE ORIGINAL SEVEN CORE LEARNINGS: RECENT PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FIELD

Participants agreed that the original Core Learnings continue to reflect their experiences in working with fathers. The following pages provide a summary of the frontline experiences that illuminate the significance of the Core Learnings.

Core Learning 1: Fathers care (even if that caring is not always shown in conventional ways).

In assessing the value of Core Learning 1, practitioners found themselves grappling with two basic questions: (1) Do most fathers care? and (2) What constitutes a good father?

Do Most Fathers Care?

Most participants believed that, by and large, the fathers they see are emotionally attached to their children even if they are not involved directly in their children's lives. They explained, however, that finding evidence of fathers' caring often requires peeling back layers of hostility and suspicion that are responses to the harsh parenting to which many young fathers were exposed as children. As a result, many of these fathers do not know how to be good parents.

Participants agreed, however, that fathers care is not "automatic" in the sense that caring is not inherent to fatherhood. Because some men have poor self-esteem, they may not be willing to invest themselves psychologically in the care of their children. Some participants indicated that whether practitioners believe that fathers care depends in part on the context in which they encounter fathers. For example, family advocates, including service providers from family court and other public agencies, are more likely to see fathers who are mandated by the courts to support their children. These fathers typically have a history of noninvolvement, financial or otherwise.

A family court service provider in Los Angeles echoed the comments of other participants, saying that it is easy for him in his line of work to forget that many fathers are sincere in their commitment to their children. In his opinion, many of the fathers he sees are motivated by a need for control or retaliation toward the mothers of their children rather than by an attachment to their children. Several focus group participants agreed with this view, suggesting that fathers sometimes avoid working simply to avoid paying child support. They added that during custody disputes some fathers show an initial interest in maintaining a relationship with their children which later proves to have been motivated by a desire to maximize their divorce settlement. A family lawyer noted,

"I wish I knew what the percentage was of guys who care versus guys who don't care In the majority of the cases that I've seen . . . the defendant will not exercise visitation. During divorce negotiations they want that 50/50, they want everything And six months later the mother's asking, "Can we do something to make him see this kid? He says he's coming and he doesn't show."

Participants attributed the discrepancy in their views on whether fathers care to the fact that while some practitioners see fathers on a voluntary basis, family court and other public service providers tend to see fathers whose involvement is wholly mandated.

What Constitutes a Good Father?

It is difficult to support or refute the Core Learning “fathers care” if “care” is not defined, argued several participants. Some participants sought evidence of fathers’ emotional attachment to their children as a “hook” that could be used to secure further practical involvement from fathers. They agreed that a father’s emotional connection could have important consequences for the lives of both father and child. One participant in Austin described a father, recently released on probation, whose feelings for his child may prevent him from returning to prison:

He said there is nothing he would do now, even if somebody bit him on the head; he would think twice before having something that would put him back in prison where he would not be there for his child. His behavior—he’s changing, because he doesn’t want to be away from his child.

Some Philadelphia participants explained that practitioners at one time expected (as many still do) that increased father involvement would be a natural and immediate consequence of a father’s discovery of his emotional attachment to his children. However, participants argued that it is difficult to know to what extent fathers’ stated feelings of affiliation with their children will translate into real outcomes for children. They asserted that it takes more than a sense of affiliation to one’s children to be a good father. One participant in Philadelphia noted:

One thing that has touched me over time is the importance of de-mystifying and de-romanticizing the way in which almost a loose kind of love and caring is expressed by fathers. We men need a dialogue that really will allow us to communicate with each other honestly about what we’re doing and move it to the next level where we’re approaching fathers and challenging them.

This perspective is relatively new and is not shared by all practitioners, especially, in his opinion, those who have been working in the field for a long time:

There are a lot of old practitioners who are defensive about the work they’ve done, and they don’t like to be challenged about that. They don’t like to examine whether they are reinforcing this kind of romantic, loose involvement that doesn’t end up translating into anything specific for the child or the family. This “fathers care” piece is one that really needs to be revisited.

In attempting to define what it means to be a good father, participants raised difficult and unanswered questions about fatherhood. Some participants working with inner-city populations argued that the first question to be answered is who can be considered a father. Must there be a biological connection? A legal connection? If not, do all adult men in the community bear responsibility for all of the children in that community?

Several participants focused on the parenthetical remark in this Core Learning—that fathers care “even if that caring is not always shown in conventional ways.” They agreed that fathers and men typically have a very different style of communication from that of mothers and women. The participants would like more research to be undertaken to understand fathers’ and men’s manner of self-expression and its implications for family well-being. At the same time, some participants argued that parental communication and behavior should be cued by the child’s needs. Further, they asserted that there are some universal markers of care that are necessary for a child’s well-being.

Participants wanted to know how to arrive at a definition of fatherhood, how the number of caring fathers can be estimated, and why some fathers care while others do not. Participants suggested that an initial approach to these questions may be (1) to identify the significance of fathers' speech and actions for children's sense of security and (2) to encourage practitioners to target and strengthen fathers' more effective modes of self-expression, which would maintain fathers' sense of identity while fostering a supportive, loving environment for their children.

Major Themes in the Discussion of Fathers Care

- It is necessary to determine standards for what constitutes a good father.
- It is necessary to estimate how many fathers meet these standards.
- Practitioners disagree on the level of commitment to children that programs should expect of fathers.

Core Learning 2: Father presence matters (in terms of economic well-being, social support, and child development).

The discussion of Core Learning 2 followed three distinctive avenues. First, to a greater extent than any of the other six, this Core Learning prompted participants to reflect on their own experiences. Second, although it was difficult to reach consensus on a minimum standard of good fathering, some indicators were suggested. Third, participants tended to focus on the role of fathers in boys' lives rather than in girls' lives.

Participants offered many personal anecdotes of how their relationships with their fathers shaped their adult lives. Several participants attributed their commitment to working with fathers to the positive support of their own fathers as they were growing up. A number of men explained how important their fathers' constant love and support had been to their identities as men and as good fathers. Other participants shared how they were hurt by the withdrawal of their fathers from their lives. For example, in Austin, one participant, a woman from an intact, two-parent family, broke down in tears as she told the group about her father's declining involvement in her life as she became a teenager. She revealed that she was so uncertain of his commitment that she did not know whether he would attend her high school graduation since he had not attended any other event.

Although they did not reach consensus on a minimum standard, participants suggested some indicators of good fathering. Participants frequently invoked the terms "biological father" and "daddy" to distinguish inadequate fathering from good fathering. The term "biological father," participants explained, refers to men who have minimal or no involvement with their biological children. Fathers who limit their involvement to paying child support are also considered strictly as biological fathers (and not daddies). The term "daddy" is reserved for fathers—and father figures—who support their children's development emotionally, academically, socially, and financially. Actual involvement in children's daily lives, participants noted, is valued by children

as much as financial provision, if not more. This belief was shared by many of the participants. It is reflected in the comments of one female participant from Austin who said:

Money is important, but it isn't everything. You spend money. My father was good with giving me money, but I have no memories. If he had held me, took me to the park, hugged me, said he loved me, I could cherish that for a lifetime. He gave me money; I can't tell you what I did with it. I don't remember what I did with it.

There are also cultural variations in fathering standards, which further complicate the attempt to define good fathering. For instance, several participants noted that some Hispanic families often prefer fathers to limit their involvement to financial provision. At the same time, participants argued that the lower rate of divorce among Hispanic families is a sign of Hispanic fathers' commitment to their children. They agreed that this example illustrates the difficulty in trying to find a standard definition of good fathering.

When examining the language of the Core Learning, participants differed in their notions of what it means for father presence to “matter.” Some argued that the ultimate standard should be how father presence matters to children. Most wanted to examine whether involved fathers can make a positive difference in the lives of children, and if so, through what level of involvement. Many participants did not view father presence as inherently good. Rather, father presence matters only when the father makes a positive contribution to the household. For this reason, many participants saw father presence as intimately linked with the issues surrounding Core Learning 1. As one participant in Los Angeles put it,

If fathers don't have the skills, or if they're abusive, or for other reasons, they may not matter; the same is true for fathers care. So a part of what's needed may be a refinement of Core Learnings One and Two to clarify what we're talking about—that we're talking about that relationship to the child, and that having the father being a real father does make a positive difference in the life of the child.

Some participants argued that father presence of any sort matters to children. From the children's perspective, physical father presence feels better—or hurts less—than no contact at all. What children want most, according to these participants' remarks, is a positive emotional connection with both parents.

Participants also suggested that father presence matters differently, and perhaps more, for sons than for daughters. All participants, the majority of whom were men, emphasized that boys need fathers in their lives, and many participants, particularly those in the Northeast and Midwest, were very much concerned with the negative impact of father absence on sons. Participants reported that male clients who entered their programs voluntarily often made the choice based on the roles that their own fathers played in their lives. It seems that some men desire to pass on the benefits they received from good father models, while others desire to compensate for their own fathers' lack of involvement. While many participants believed that male role models are important to sons, they disagreed about how effective such role models are in the lives of boys with absent biological fathers.

Few participants discussed the significance of father presence or of male role models for

daughters, and most of those who did were women. Male and female participants seemed to agree, however, on the role that fathers play in their daughters' lives. Male participants indicated that a father's role in his daughter's life is to set an example of how she should expect to be treated by her future male partner(s). Female practitioners referred to fathers' frequent failure to set a high enough standard for future partners. They discussed the negative impact on daughters of not receiving the love or attention they need from their fathers (even when the fathers are present in the home). These practitioners observed that daughters may spend the rest of their lives searching for the love they never received from their fathers. A female practitioner explained,

That daughter knows what true love is if that father is there and giving that true love. Then she won't jump from boyfriend to boyfriend to find that true love. They're actually looking for a father figure . . . so fathers matter.

Major Themes in the Discussion of Father Presence Matters

- Many children want their fathers to be involved in their lives and stand to benefit from positive father involvement.
- Cultural variations in fathering standards illustrate the difficulties in attempting to define good fathering.
- Father presence matters differently for boys and girls.

Core Learning 3: Joblessness is a major impediment to family formation and father involvement.

Most participants felt strongly that joblessness and problems caused by unemployment act as obstacles to sustained father involvement for many men. They also stated that society places too much emphasis on the provider role and not enough on the nurturing role. They discussed many problems that fathers and children face as a result of this imbalance in emphasis. Three major themes emerged in the discussion of Core Learning 3. The first was that fathers' attitudes toward joblessness—and work—may play a larger role than actual joblessness in family life. Second, the causal chain of events in which joblessness leads to the withdrawal of many men from family life often begins with poor schooling and limited education. Third, the reasons for the significance of employment (and employment decisions) to father involvement should be stated explicitly in Core Learning 3.

Participants reported that many men who can not contribute financially to their children's well-being feel unentitled to fulfill any other parental role. They have found that for many men, fulfillment of the provider role serves as a prerequisite for other forms of father involvement. One participant in Austin described a father whose child entered the foster care system. The father had an odd job and brought the child gifts whenever he visited—until he lost his job:

The father lost his job and of course he was no longer able to bring gifts. And after a period of time he stopped coming to visitation. You could just see that he felt like 'I need to offer something. This kid's in foster care, and I'm not able to do anything as far as raising him. I would at least like to give him something.' I do see fathers shy away from the family when they're not able to provide financial support.

When fathers do find work, their desire to prove that they can be good providers often causes them to make poor long-term decisions, noted several participants. One participant gave the example of young fathers who find short-term work shortly before Christmas. The jobs often pay only five dollars an hour, and the young fathers use their entire pay to purchase expensive gifts for their children.

Participants made two major points that they believed should be captured in the wording of Core Learning 3. First, many argued that it is not joblessness itself that causes fathers to withdraw from their children. Rather, fathers' attitudes toward work and unemployment, including the way in which work acts as a basis for self-esteem, may play a large role in determining involvement. One participant noted,

I don't think it's joblessness as much as it is the father's attitude toward the joblessness. There could be situations where if they were jobless they have more time to spend with their children and feel better about being a father. So it's more their attitude, not necessarily the state of not having a job, but how they feel about not having a job.

This participant pointed out that some fathers voluntarily forgo paid full-time work to raise their children, which suggests that there are other factors besides joblessness that influence men's decisions and behaviors.

Participants agreed, however, that joblessness causes at least some strain on the father's relationship to the family, particularly in families that were already struggling financially. For fathers in these families, joblessness is often a result of poor education. Young people who do not acquire basic skills in school are unable to find employment, and students are sometimes kept unaware of their deficiencies by being passed through the educational system even when they have a poor understanding of the material.

Participants strongly supported Core Learning 3 and suggested that its wording describe more explicitly how employment (and employment decisions) influence father involvement and family formation. For instance, employment can interfere with healthy family life just as joblessness can. Some participants pointed out that fathers often invest too much time in paid work (either by choice or of necessity), leaving little quality time to spend with their children.

Participants raised several questions for research: What kinds of employment tend to preclude high levels of involvement with the family? Do certain occupational choices threaten the father's safety to the extent that the family is weakened? How do fathers determine what is an acceptable level of family income? How meaningful is the provider role when its fulfillment does more damage to children than does a lower standard of living? Answers to these questions may help to clarify what employment means to men and how these meanings influence the way they father their children.

Major Themes in the Discussion of Employment and Joblessness

- Fathers' attitudes toward joblessness (and work) may play a larger role in their family involvement than joblessness in itself.
- Poor quality education is often a contributing factor in joblessness, particularly within intergenerationally poor families and poor families of color.
- The significance of employment (and employment decisions) to father involvement should be stated explicitly in this Core Learning.

Core Learning 4: Existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement, and paternity establishment operate to provide obstacles and disincentives to father involvement. Moreover, the disincentives are sufficiently compelling as to have prompted the emergence of a phenomenon dubbed "underground fathers"—men who acknowledge paternity and are involved in the lives of their children but who refuse to participate as fathers in the formal systems.

Participants supported Core Learning 4 and recommended that the concept be broadened to include more subtle societal barriers. The first thread of conversation focused on child support enforcement and public assistance policies, which participants said contain some of the most discouraging systemic barriers to father involvement. The second topic was barriers to paternal participation that are less directly related to public policy. These barriers include problems arising from custody disputes, visitation rights, and child support agreements postdivorce. The third topic of discussion was informal societal and individual barriers to fatherhood that shape policy. These include negative stereotypes of fathers and sexist attitudes toward childrearing.

It is important to keep in mind that the Core Learnings are intended to reflect issues that affect fathers across the spectrum. Not all fathers will face the same barriers to the same extent. In discussing the following barriers, participants highlighted what kinds of fathers faced which particular challenges.

Noncustodial Fathers and the Child Support Enforcement System

In the discussion of noncustodial fathers, participants asserted that current child support enforcement policies fail to make distinctions between men who are able to pay child support and those who are not and between those who are involved in parenting activities and those who are not. In their opinion, men who fit into different categories should be treated differently. They cited as unfair, for example, the fact that fathers who spend time in caregiving but who can not afford to pay child support accumulate arrearages in the same way as uninvolved, non-paying fathers. Participants asserted that financial support is only one aspect of father involvement and that poor fathers who contribute to their children's well-being through childcare and material assistance should receive some form of amnesty from arrearages.

Furthermore, participants argued that policies should be based on serving the needs of children rather than on punishing fathers. The Los Angeles and Minnesota groups paid particular attention to this issue. Several participants cited examples of misguided policies, such as suspending a father's driver's license, that actually make it more difficult for fathers who are in arrears to provide for their children.

Noncustodial Fathers and Welfare Reform

All participants agreed that former AFDC policies discouraged fathers from being visible and active in the lives of their children. Participants cited the 50-dollar "pass-through" policy as a disincentive to paying child support for fathers with families receiving AFDC. The pass-through permits AFDC families to receive only 50 dollars a month from the child support collected from the father. As a result, many fathers in this category prefer to contribute to their children's financial support informally.

Participants in Los Angeles were hesitant to focus too much of their discussion on the current welfare system, since at the time of the meeting it was in the process of being dismantled and replaced by the TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) system. Participants in each of the focus group meetings were hopeful that the current overhaul of the welfare system might provide the opportunity to rethink defeating conceptions of fatherhood. One Minnesota participant remarked,

I think that welfare reform may present an opportunity for state and federal government to look at creative ways to bring fathers in to care for their children if the mothers go to work and vice versa. And to look at caring for the child as a form of child support—you can provide \$10,000 of childcare when you can't provide \$300 in child support.

Custody Disputes, Visitation Rights, and Child Support Agreements

Mistrust of a former spouse plays a large role in many divorced fathers' refusal to pay child support. This mistrust has implications for future cooperative or shared parenting efforts. Participants explained that many of their noncustodial clients resent making payments directly to the mother and would prefer to have more control over how the money is allocated. Some fathers, for example, are suspicious that mothers squander the money intended for their children on themselves or their boyfriends.

In addition, a few participants argued that the visitation system is biased against fathers and that visitation restrictions contribute to their sense of alienation from their children. Several female practitioners in Austin noted that fathers fear losing touch with their children and resent being made to feel like visitors. In particular, these fathers are angered by their loss of parental authority in their children's lives:

Fathers that aren't in the home, such as in the divorce cases, want to have more attachment and more direction over their child's development than they have because they're not there. The comments they make are like 'I'm just handing over money,' and if they're having problems with the child, it's because of the

ex-wife—‘She doesn’t know how to control the child.’

Informal Societal Barriers to Father Involvement

Systemic barriers to father involvement, according to participants, stem from the common stereotype of noncustodial fathers as uninterested and uninvolved parents. Participants strongly emphasized the need to revamp public policies—and media portrayals—to reflect the variation among noncustodial fathers. Participants agreed that some non-custodial fathers are very committed to parenthood. In addition there are a wide range of circumstances and motivations behind fathers who are not as committed.

Participants identified other pervasive, yet informal, barriers to father involvement, including media stereotypes, the breakdown of neighborhood family supports, and sexist attitudes toward childrearing. In particular, participants argued that media portrayals of fathers as incompetent, uninterested parents and sexist notions of childcare as “women’s work” severely undermine efforts to reconnect fathers to their families. Some participants argued that these negative messages are detrimental to the community as well as to the family. They observed that because the home is seen as the woman’s domain, many young men, especially those in inner cities, opt for life on the streets where they believe they will not be controlled by women.

Finally, a recurrent theme throughout the focus groups was participants’ profound disappointment in the breakdown of communities and the influence of this breakdown on the destruction of family life. They worried that in many poor neighborhoods the place of traditional community is being taken by a gang culture that advocates impregnating women and abandoning them as the way to prove one’s manhood. This kind of message deters young fathers from playing an active role in their children’s lives. As one practitioner from the Philadelphia group explained,

You’re considered a chump if you stay A real ‘player’ has children, has girls, and doesn’t stay. A lot of young guys start thinking they can’t show emotions about their children or they will look like chumps in front of their peers. We can never romanticize a peer culture that creates a negative outcome for our community and our children.

Major Themes in the Discussion of Systemic Barriers

- Some barriers are more relevant to certain kinds of fathers.
- Barriers to involvement can include components of public policy as well as societal messages or individual dispositions; the Core Learning should capture this complexity.
- Contemporary approaches to child support make no allowance for nonfinancial support, which penalizes poor fathers in particular.

Core Learning 5: A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the skills they will need to share the responsibility for parenting.

Participants initiated their discussion of Core Learning 5 by pointing out that most new parents of all ages are unaware of how much work is involved in caring for a child, and many lack the skills to be effective parents. Second, they addressed the problem that boys in particular are often cut off from and often discouraged from obtaining childcare experiences, leaving them unprepared for the role of involved father and unsure of the value of gaining the skills necessary for involved fatherhood. Third, the participants emphasized that society (both as a collective and as individuals) does not address how much work is involved in parenting.

Because participants believed that this Core Learning applies to all new parents, many participants recommended removing references to young parents in the wording of the Core Learning. They argued that parents of all ages typically come to parenting with few skills, such as negotiating differences in parenting styles. The general consensus was that efforts should focus on educating all citizens, young and old, male and female, about what is involved in becoming a parent.

Despite this caveat, however, most discussions tended to focus on the lack of preparation of teen parents, so that Core Learnings 5 and 6 were sometimes fused into one discussion. Participants noted that while people of all ages fail to recognize what is involved in parenting, adolescents are especially likely to lack the personal and financial resources to meet the demands of parenthood or cooperative parenting. Perhaps because a baby is less immediately present in a male's life, adolescent fathers have less incentive than adolescent mothers to develop the necessary personal resources for daily caregiving responsibilities. Participants pointed out that girls, like boys, tend to lack parenting skills; girls, however, are usually forced to learn "on the job":

I don't think the young boys realize what's involved in caring for a child. The young mothers don't either, but . . . unfortunately the young mother is forced to realize it.

Participants noted that boys are typically excluded from most childcare experiences. As a result, boys receive less preparation for involved parenting, and this lack of preparation can arouse feelings of incompetence that may alienate men as fathers. In fact, most participants noted that boys can be interested and competent caregivers. A participant who has taught parent education classes in high schools remarked that boys participate as enthusiastically as girls in classroom discussion and activities. Outside of the classroom some boys show such a high degree of competence when given the chance to care for children that many participants would like to see boys given more opportunities to hone their skills. One participant commented,

I have seen many teenage boys get involved with a program for severely handicapped children These teenage boys were just wonderful with these kids. I just wonder if maybe we should encourage more babysitting type curriculum, give them the opportunity to learn some skills and practice them before they become fathers.

Most of the discussion of cooperative parenting focused on the need to educate the public—from young children to adults—about what is involved in being a good parent. However, participants feared that this brings them back to "square one," where there are no established criteria for what constitutes a good parent. While many participants felt unsure themselves of what would define a good parent, they recognized that the way people were parented and the parental interactions they observed as children have enormous impact on how they treat their

own children and their co-parenting relationship with their partner. Participants stated, for instance, that differences in young parents' upbringing can cause friction in their co-parenting relationships. Participants in the Los Angeles group suggested that if at least one of the new parents had had a father available, the young parents would be more likely to value fatherhood and to collaborate to keep the father involved in the child's life (as compared to cases in which neither parent had known an available father).

The concept of cooperative parenting is tied to other Core Learnings as well. As mentioned earlier, key issues in Core Learning 6, Role Transitions, also arose in the context of discussions of cooperation. And Systemic Barriers (Core Learning 4) play a significant role in determining whether cooperative efforts will succeed or fail. For instance, sexist notions about parenting (e.g., parenting is "women's work") and low societal expectations for father involvement (e.g., as evidenced in the lack of parenting education classes for males) act as disincentives to cooperative relationships.

Major Themes in the Discussion of Co-Parenting

- This Core Learning applies to parents of all ages, not just young parents.
- Most people do not know what is involved in being a parent.
- Boys are typically excluded from most childcare training and are thus especially unprepared to cooperate as involved caregivers.

Core Learning 6: The transition from biological father to committed parent has significant developmental implications for young fathers.

Participants noted that men and women of all ages grapple not only with difficulties in forging a cooperative relationship but also with the transition to parenthood. The first theme of the discussion focused on how new parents, especially men, often fail to appreciate how significant this adjustment will be. Second, participants speculated that age or maturity may play a large role in determining the success of the man's transition to fatherhood. Finally, the need for education and attitude change was discussed.

Participants provided examples of men in their own lives (husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, etc.) who found the responsibilities of fatherhood more overwhelming than they had imagined. Participants noted that some men's first experience with children comes when they are fathers. Few men have any idea of how the adjustments they have to make will affect their everyday lives. One participant observed,

My husband, when we got married, he wanted children . . . and once they got here, it was a little different than he expected. His friends, when they get paid, they go shopping or hang out. We get paid, and we get bills This was his first child. He wasn't a teenage father, and even for him, it's a learning experience.

Based on their own personal experience, some participants, chiefly women, noted that many men do not make the transition to fatherhood successfully. They speculated that age plays a significant role in making a successful transition, although the nature of the role is unclear. Several participants reported what they considered to be a surprisingly high level of involvement and commitment from teenage fathers, while slightly older fathers (20 -35 years) focus more on the battle with the mother than on relationships with the children. A few participants suggested that very young fathers may accept their poor economic prospects and try to focus instead on cultivating a strong relationship with their children. Older fathers, particularly those in their late 30s or early 40s and those who have been in prison, appear to feel a renewed sense of responsibility and interest in their children. Further, some participants reported that program recruitment rates for men in their 30s (although still fairly low) are among the best.

The role of age is critical to participants who want to reach out to fathers when they are “ripe” for involvement. Participants stated that they would like access to research data that differentiate, for instance, between the issues facing the 17-year-old new father and the 35-year-old new father. Based on their program experiences, they argued that such data (particularly if older first-time fathers were found to desire greater involvement) would have significant implications for current funding decisions, which tend to be geared towards young fathers.³

Some participants suggested that it may be maturity rather than age itself that affects father involvement. This might explain why some teens seem more committed than some older fathers. Furthermore, they noted that even just a few years can make a significant difference in the commitment of very young fathers. This was especially striking in one Minnesota participant’s comment:

We started out with my stepson’s first daughter that he had at 13, and he was trying to do everything, including financially And then when the relationship soured with the girl, he dropped the daughter like a hot potato, and his attitude is still, “she’s not mine.” And then later on he had a second daughter with another girl, at I guess 18. He got very involved, and he’s been very involved ever since, even after the relationship soured.

Participants speculated that men might adjust to fatherhood more easily if they had a more realistic idea of what parenthood is like. Such education might encourage teenagers to postpone parenthood until they are prepared financially and emotionally. Many participants argued that education should be geared toward attitude change. Participants pointed out that even when teens see the effects of unprotected sex every day, they still maintain that “it won’t happen to me.” Education alone, it would seem, has its limits when teens believe that what they are being taught does not really apply to them. Attitude change is also necessary on the part of parents and educators. For instance, many participants argued that too often only girls are warned about early pregnancy. One participant in the Philadelphia group noted,

There is always this emphasis on educating young women about the responsibilities of early pregnancy and childbearing while a lot of young men have the concept that you’re not a man until you have a baby. Nobody in authority . . . spends time telling young men not to become a father. They’ll tell their

³ An upcoming NCOFF survey will examine in detail the demographics of participants in fathers programs.

daughters and young ladies, 'don't get pregnant,' like it's a one-sided deal.

Major Themes in the Discussion of Role Transitions

- The transition to fatherhood is made more complex because boys and men are uninformed about and unprepared for the changes that parenthood brings.
- Age and maturity appear to play a role in how successfully a man will make the transition to fatherhood.
- Education that gives teenagers a realistic portrayal of parenthood should be accompanied by efforts to induce attitude change.

Core Learning 7: The behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices within families of origin.

The major focus of the discussion around this Core Learning (and a thread that ran throughout all of the focus group sessions) was the observation that parents typically base their parenting practices on the way they were raised. Participants noted that this tendency can result in the need for practitioners to teach less harsh parenting techniques to fathers in their programs; however, many feared that modern parenting practices which shun corporal punishment are to blame for the lack of discipline and self-control of young people today. Finally, while participants agreed that early education is essential for influencing how people parent, they were unsure about what style of parenting should be advocated.

Participants found that parents rely on what they know—essentially what they experienced as children—in bringing up their own children and often resist information that suggests that their parenting style may be harmful. Most adopt the attitude, “If it was good enough for me, it’s good enough for my children.” As one participant explained,

The way their parents parented them—people generally feel pretty comfortable with that. I've seen families where children have been whipped with extension cords, and they say, 'that's what happened to me and I turned out okay.'

Because many parents are reluctant to admit that the parenting they received may have been too harsh, participants often try to reframe the issue to focus on giving these parents options that may not have been available to their parents. An Austin participant who works with families in the military described how he encourages parents to change their practices without being critical of their own upbringing:

When I get into discussions with folks about 'Look at how I turned out and how my parents

disciplined me,' what I always try to bring back is that your parents did the best they could at the time they were raising you. I always talk about computers: my granddaughter started working on computers in K-4; I was 34 years old when I learned how to operate computers. I tell parents that even though their parents probably did the best they could with what they had, now there's the opportunity for you to change and to do something different.

On the other hand, participants argued that many parents who believe that the discipline they received was too harsh may overcompensate and become overly permissive with their children. Some participants pointed out that parenting practices common 30 years ago might now be considered child abuse. One participant described some of the ambivalence she feels in trying to make sense of traditional parenting practices:

I came up in an era where if you talked back or even looked back, you got slapped to the floor, and that was not child abuse. And then when you grow up, you say, 'I'm not going to treat my children the way I was treated,' but then look at how most of our kids turn out: they're rotten brats. I had strict discipline and I'm carrying that over . . . I can't say my parents were wrong in the way they handled us because we did very well. None of us went to prison. We have good jobs, and we're married.

On the one hand, participants said that they encourage parents to discontinue abusive practices, but on the other hand, they expressed concern that young people today lack the discipline, control, and respect necessary to become productive citizens because of the permissive parenting attitudes of contemporary society. Some feared that a cycle may have been created in which strict parenting is followed by permissive parenting as each generation reacts against the practices of the preceding one. The goal of many participants is to stop this cycle, and they see early education as the key. They were unsure, however, about what a curriculum should look like or how it should be presented. Participants pointed out that practitioners in general disagree with each other about what should be taught and when, and many participants noted that they personally are ambivalent about which parenting styles to advocate.

Participants saw Intergenerational Learning as the bedrock of the other Core Learnings. Parents may reproduce their own parents' behavior in cooperative relationships, and their failure to have their needs met by their parents may cause them to search in futility for a sense of security and self-acceptance in adult relationships. Perhaps most critically, participants told us that what people consider to be a model of a good father is profoundly shaped by the experiences they have had with their own fathers.

Major Themes in the Discussion of Intergenerational Learning

- Participants view this Core Learning as the bedrock of the other six Learnings; Intergenerational Learning lays the foundation for other aspects of parenting.
- Parents tend to rely on the way they were raised as a model of parenting.
- Although participants advocate early education to promote healthy parenting, there is not a consensus about what "healthy" means.

- PRACTITIONER HYPOTHESES AND RECOMMENDATIONS: ISSUES FOR NEW CORE LEARNINGS
- CORE LEARNINGS

It became clear from participants' comments that the seven Core Learnings are a useful framework for unpacking the complex issues involved in working with fathers and families. The modifications suggested by participants pointed to important voids in research and policy conceptualizations of the problems facing many young fathers and families. Figure 3 (*see next page*) provides an overview of the suggested modifications to the Core Learnings; the major themes in each, as identified by focus group members; and some of the research questions that the themes suggest.

The seven themes presented above address key issues identified by participants. They represent participants' visions for the future direction of the field of fathers and families. They illuminate the interrelationships among the current Core Learnings and underscore the fact that none of the Learnings should be viewed in isolation.

1. Poor schooling and lack of access to educational opportunities limit the employment options of many fathers and contribute to family instability, which threatens children's well-being and school achievement.

Throughout the meetings, participants focused on the need for better schooling and increased opportunities for fathers so that they may gain employment that will allow them to support their children and families. Participants noted that public policy discussions of father involvement typically do not focus on employment or on the relative lack of educational preparation of many fathers. Participants observed that many young fathers, particularly those who grew up in low-income homes and neighborhoods, have not been exposed to adequate schooling and have not been prepared sufficiently to seek and assume employment that will enable them to be responsible parents.

However, poor schooling, as the participants suggested, affects more than a father's or mother's ability to get a job and provide financial support for children. Poor schooling also may influence whether and how parents interact with schools and teachers, the degree to which they believe they can contribute to their children's education, and how they work with vested individuals within their families, communities, and schools to ensure the well-being of children. Once young people become parents, what do we expect them to contribute to their children's development? What educational resources are available to parents and children, and what are the roles of schools, parents, and communities in ensuring that young children are prepared with the appropriate literacy, problem-solving, and life skills to achieve their goals?

2. Current discussions about father involvement often minimize the significance of the vulnerable situations of many fathers and families, including conditions associated with poverty, drug use, incarceration, and family violence.

Several participants focused on the problems of poverty, drug use, and incarceration as obstacles to father involvement. However, they cited examples of programs that equip fathers affected by these circumstances to be engaged with their children. Poor fathers are limited in the opportunities they can afford children. Many of these fathers may not know appropriate ways to engage their children aside from material contributions and yet do not have the financial resources to

Figure 3: Results of Discussion on Current Core Learnings and Directions for Research

CORE LEARNING	MODIFICATIONS	MAJOR THEMES	RESEARCH QUESTIONS
• Fathers Care	not all fathers care	how to define a good father	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there generic, child-motivated ways of caring? • What is fathering?
Father Presence Matters	good fathers matter	how to define a good father	What kind of involvement makes a difference?
• Employment and Joblessness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • education plays major role in joblessness • father's attitude toward work is crucial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • masculine ideal conflicts with fatherhood ideal • low levels of education as an impediment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does having, or not having, a job interfere with fathering? • How do education and schooling contribute to employment options and father involvement?
Systemic Barriers	broaden to include personal and community barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • noncustodial fathers are a diverse group • more recognition of in-kind support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How can credit be given for in-kind support in a systematic way? • How does society ensure that children receive the support they need in a way that is fair to everyone?
• Co-Parenting	relevant to all ages; eliminate "young"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • educate public about realities of parenting • give boys more childcare opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What should a model of parenting look like? • How do we eliminate sexist attitudes about childcare as women's work?
Role Transitions	none	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • work on attitude change • educate about the realities of parenting • eliminate sex bias in socialization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What role do age and maturity play in the transition to committed fatherhood? • How do we encourage teens to change harmful attitudes?
• Intergenerational Issues	this learning is foundational	models of parenting are passed on from generation to generation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What should a model of parenting look like? • Who decides?

provide for them. As participants commented, poor fathers are battling against their own lack of financial resources and societal and cultural messages that value material wealth above human contributions to children's development.

Participants also indicated that father absence for some segments of the population may be associated with fathers' drug use and incarceration. Both conditions and the problems associated with them reduce the likelihood that these fathers will be able to get jobs. This situation raises the question of how these fathers can best be supported in making the transition to responsible adulthood and responsible fatherhood.

As participants spoke of the problems of poor or absent fathers, they also mentioned the problems of unhealthy and violent family interactions. While they argued that the men in their programs are no more violent than men in the general population, the focus group participants talked about the special circumstances in which many of these fathers find themselves and the ways they grapple with issues of power, personal defeat, and the role of men and fathers in communities and families.

3. Many young fathers and families experience isolation and a sense of hopelessness, but the transition to parenthood may provoke a new search for meaning in life.

The participants raised questions that echoed the theme of Core Learning 6: What do we know about changes in men's behaviors, beliefs, and sense of responsibility in the transition from biological father to positively engaged father? Participants observed that becoming a father is often a revelation for young men, providing an opportunity for new meaning in their lives. Becoming a father deepens some men's sense of personal responsibility, while others require assistance in making the personal and emotional changes needed for responsible fatherhood. The voluntary participation of fathers in many of the focus group participants' programs is one demonstration of some fathers' search for guidance in making these personal transitions. Even fathers mandated to participate in programs often show enhanced responsibility and commitment to the fathering role by the end of their participation, according to the focus group participants.

Whereas communities, community leaders, and other parents once provided a strong supportive context for new parents, today many young men and women experience isolation and hopelessness in their effort to provide a positive environment for their children, especially in poor neighborhoods, participants observed. Furthermore, many young fathers today have never had the benefit of a positive father figure during their own childhood. The participants noted that the breakdown of communities and standards of conduct, the weakened influence of community institutions such as the church, and the absence of many fathers over the past generation make it necessary for new fathers to conduct an independent search for models of responsible parenting and for meaning in their lives as fathers. This search for meaning may (or may not) have a traditional spiritual dimension.

4. Preparation for the future responsibilities of parenthood and family life should begin early in a child's life.

Before becoming parents, many people do not recognize how difficult it is to be a good parent. They are unprepared to accept the enormous amount of work that parenting entails. Participants argued that the first order of business should be to educate citizens from a very young age about

the realities of parenthood. Some participants suggested that simply getting young people to understand the day-to-day drudgery of parenthood and the sacrifices that have to be made on a regular basis can have a significant impact on teen pregnancy and unwanted pregnancy in general. Some participants suggested what they called a “highway patrol model” of parenting education which would enable students to learn about how various parenting scenarios affect children later in life.

Participants added that they hope that attitudes will change as a result of this education. They noted that too often education falls on deaf ears because young people adopt an “it won’t happen to me” attitude. Young people ignore the fact that their behavior is risky. In one striking example, a participant in the Philadelphia group described the disgusted reaction of one of the fathers in her program to a graphic film about drug abuse. She had to point out to him that his alcoholism jeopardized his health and well-being, just as drug use did for the subject of the film. For education to be effective, young people must draw a connection between what they are learning and what is taking place in their own lives, participants asserted.

After education about the realities of parenthood, the second component of preparing children for parenthood involves teaching them the skills they will need to become healthy, well-adjusted adults in general as well as the particular skills needed for parenting. Participants suggested that parents will not be able to care for their children if they do not know how to care for themselves. For instance, helping young children to develop coping skills for dealing with stressful circumstances can help them to reach their own goals and can prevent them from resorting to child abuse as parents. (*see figure 5—page 32*)

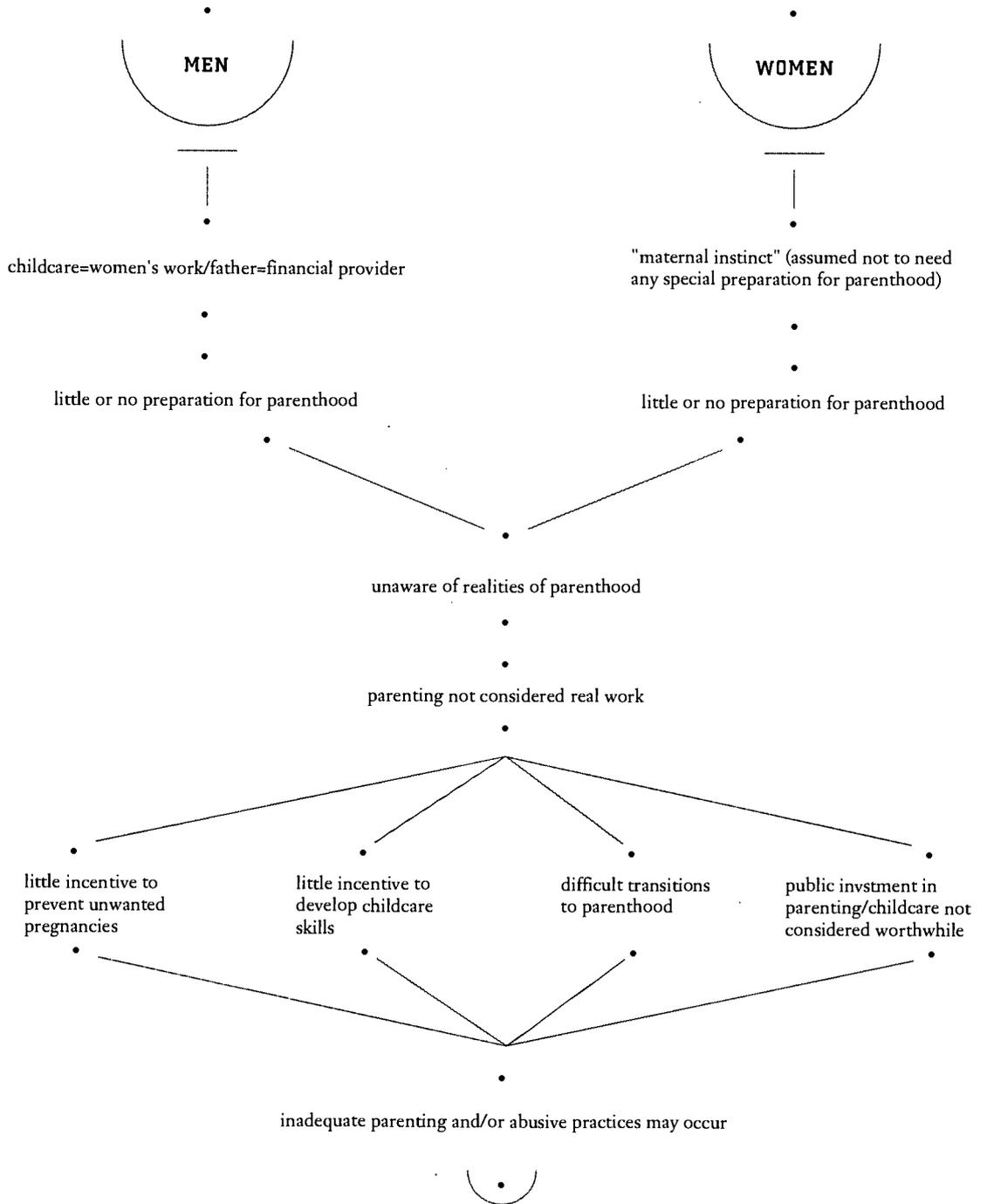
5. Encouraging involved fatherhood means moving away from traditional ideals that define manhood in opposition to womanhood and developing models of good fathering.

Participants have discovered that many masculine ideals devalue the qualities that are necessary for active fatherhood. Participants stressed that the male ideals of control and suppression of the emotions interfere with creating a healthy family life and nurturing environment for children. Societal messages that stress control as a male virtue combined with messages that the home is the woman’s domain deter men from playing an active role in family life and increase the lure of the streets. Furthermore, sexist thinking and the automatic association of women with childcare have led to the assumption that parenting is innate and not real work because women do it. As a result of failing to appreciate how much work is entailed in parenting, the public (as an entity and as individual parents) does not view it as a skill that must be developed and does not support sufficient societal investment in childrearing.

A dominant theme throughout the meetings was the need for more discussion about models of good fathering and the reality that many fathers have been raised in families where there has been intergenerational father absence. In many communities, father presence is rare, and in some (e.g., some Hispanic communities) father involvement in childcare is neither expected nor perhaps desired, according to participants. Participants observed that current models do not accommodate sufficiently the needs and values of such communities.

Although there was much agreement that we need better models of good fathering, there was no consensus about the details of these models: What the components of good fathering might be, how we account for cultural variation among fathers and variation among fathers within cultural and ethnic groups, how different models interact with different family structures, how best to

Figure 5: Causes and Consequences of Societal Views of Parenting. According to participants, both men and women typically do not view parenthood as real work and are frequently unprepared for this difficult role. The consequences for children can be devastating.



help men understand the range of possible roles in supporting children and their mothers, and how to encourage men to contribute to their families in constructive ways that build on mutual respect between parents.

6. A systematic analysis of programs for fathers will help identify what elements are essential for re-connecting fathers to families.

With a strong knowledge of program practices, participants and policymakers can build on efforts that are already working. For instance, research is needed to investigate formally the participants' finding that programs are most successful when they take a holistic approach that involves improving a father's overall well-being rather than just his income. In particular, programs that insist that fathers conform to rigid agendas and fail to take into account individuals' needs or interests tend to fare the worst, based on participants' experiences. Most participants have found that clients are more likely to commit to a program when they believe their needs are being taken seriously.

Participants also stated that research can illuminate and explain contradictions among the observations of practitioners who work closely with fathers and families. For instance, participants' reports are mixed regarding the age at which fathers are most likely to make an emotional commitment to their children: many argue that older parents face some of the same problems as younger parents and that men who are 20 years apart may be at the same developmental stage. Several participants indicated that it would be helpful for their programs if researchers could identify the roles that age and maturity play in men's willingness to act as committed parents.

7. Communities' cohesiveness and power to set standards is eroding.

At one time, family, school, and community worked together and presented a unified front against behavior considered undesirable. Now, participants argued, parents must be ever vigilant to protect their children from the threats of the community, whether those threats are drug dealers on street corners or media messages that advocate wanton consumerism and meaningless sex. For most participants, the disintegration of the local community is one of the most immediate threats to children's well-being. Once, neighbors were considered to be back-up parents; now they are potential predators. As one participant put it,

When I was growing up, the village was considered a healthy village. Nowadays the village is not a healthy village. There are some folks in the village who I would just as soon that they didn't assist me in raising my child. So considering that we have some sick villagers, we really have to take that into consideration when we say it takes a village to raise a child.

While voicing their despair about the community's undermining of parental influence, some participants have found a variety of creative alternatives to the neighborhoods of the past which help nurture the development of all society's members. For instance, when one participant in Austin moved to a remote, unfamiliar area, she approached others who had recently moved into the area about starting some regular social activities. Today, her children have many nonbiological "aunts" and "uncles" looking out for them. Similarly, many participants found mentoring relationships to be at least part of the solution to the void left by communities in passing down cultural knowledge. Children, especially those who lack active fathers, can benefit from the interest and support of mentors. Novice parents can develop parenting skills by teaming up with more experienced parents.



HOW POLICY AND RESEARCH CAN SUPPORT PROGRAMS, PRACTICE, AND FAMILIES

NCOFF designed the focus group discussions to be a source of information for determining how well current initiatives reflect the realities of practice. Issues of policy and research were part of the natural flow of the discussion. Below are some of the most salient points made by practitioners in the focus group meetings. While NCOFF does not intend to base policy recommendations on these comments, they will be used to inform future discussions on policy and practice.

Policy

Many participants felt that the Core Learnings should include policy recommendations. They saw policy initiatives as integral to the Core Learnings and believed that NCOFF should take a stand by recommending specific initiatives. A participant in Los Angeles noted,

There ought to be something that comes out of those Learnings that says, okay, based upon these principles we're going to develop policy . . . Several of the Core Learnings have to do with the rights of fathers, the responsibilities of fathers, that sort of thing. But that ought to be spelled out, as the basic kind of thing that informs policy.

There was some support for all policy initiatives discussed (*see Appendix A for a copy of the Discussion Guide*). However, most participants focused on the philosophy that guides policy rather than on specific initiatives. Participants agreed that policy should be preventive and child-focused. Most participants offered stories of committed fathers who provided for their children by contributing diapers, clothes, or toys only to find themselves in arrears on child support payments because they were not contributing through the official system. Participants argued that the system is unfair to poor people who simply do not have sufficient, regular income to make payments but who can contribute, nonetheless, to their children's well-being. As a Los Angeles participant pointed out,

Definitely for no-income or low-income people we're going to have to expand what child support means. It can't mean money . . . It's got to be something else. For instance, somebody who goes and baby-sits all day, provides child-care when Mom goes to work, even though they're not living together

For many participants, a broader definition of support would in turn place higher expectations on parents. Participants' comments indicated that while the public has a responsibility to support parents, parents must in turn be willing to commit themselves to doing all they can to promote their children's well-being:

Concerning policy, I would put . . . concern for children at the top of the list. . . and if these adults are going to have to suffer, so be it. Whether there's one family or two families, they've got to make adjustments, and they've made decisions and there are consequences to their actions. There's a public responsibility to help them be responsible, to help them carry out this, but I really want to hold those children as primary in importance.

Most of the discussion on the specific policy initiatives listed in the discussion guide was generated by practitioner-advocates (lawyers, federal agency administrators, etc.) who attended the Los Angeles meetings and who argued that the details of paternity establishment are unknown or misunderstood by most parents. There was confusion regarding the rules and practices of paternity establishment even among those participants most involved with policy. Practitioner-advocates had the most to say about the first policy initiative, disentangling paternity establishment from child support enforcement. They found this idea appealing, but unfeasible. A representative of a district attorney's office explained,

I don't know how you can do that. Because what you are saying is we're not going to collect child support. I think you're trying to fool somebody if that's what you're saying.

All agreed that the benefits of paternity establishment should be explained to the unmarried couple at the time of birth. They indicated that many low-income parents believe that paternity establishment is merely a codeword for establishing child support. Some participants also recommended instituting custody and visitation at the time of paternity establishment.

Research

Just as participants see this as a time for society to rework its definitions of manhood, they also see a chance for them to revisit their own roles as practitioners. Participants suggested that, like the fathers they serve, they may have difficulty making sense of their own upbringing, which may make them unsure about which parenting styles to advocate. Research can provide a resource to practitioners by identifying what behaviors will produce particular outcomes and by providing a sense of the “big picture” when practitioners feel overwhelmed by the particulars of a situation.

Practitioners are intimately aware of the awesome responsibilities of guiding clients in their family roles. They look to research to provide an informed, “third-party” perspective that might alleviate some of the pressure they feel. As mentioned earlier, participants’ discussions during the focus group meetings were infused with their own experiences, suggesting that their personal backgrounds play a major role in guiding their interactions with the fathers in their programs. Participants who work with young fathers were sensitive to the fact that they are taking the place of parents in the young men’s lives and were aware that, like the young men’s own parents, they bring a great deal of “baggage” to this relationship. Participants also admitted that in teaching parenting they are forced to take a stand on issues that they may not have resolved for themselves. On the one hand, practitioners need to be able to relate in a personal way to fathers’ experiences; on the other hand, these personal experiences are not supposed to influence the practitioner-father relationship negatively. Participants indicated that outcome-based research would be an important alternative resource that would guide them toward helping fathers and families make positive changes.

In situations in which their own experience seemed inadequate for the situation, participants envisioned research as a neutral place (with respect to their particular circumstance) to turn for information. Participants set high standards for themselves as well as for the fathers and families in their programs. Many feared, however, that their position of authority in the practitioner-father relationship leads them to create double standards, i.e., to demand behavior from a father that they themselves may not practice. Others were concerned that practitioners as a group differ significantly on crucial issues and fail to present a unified front to the families served. Still others wanted to know how to address important issues with the few programs available. For instance, several participants asked how to provide a supportive atmosphere for fathers without encouraging them to become dependent on practitioners.

Focus group participants want to share what they have learned with parents who are struggling, and they often manage to salvage families and individuals who might otherwise have fallen through the cracks. Research can help them by presenting a macro-level analysis of the outcomes of interventions. Practitioners around the country struggle with the same issues in a variety of programs. Research can enable the individual practitioner to benefit from the experience of others on a much larger scale than is possible from working in one community. Like the proverbial blind men trying to identify an elephant, with each man groping at a foot or an ear or a trunk, practitioners working intensively in local communities are prevented often from seeing the overall picture. Research can enable them to examine issues from a variety of angles and can add new perspectives to existing approaches to promoting father involvement.

2. EXERCISING THE OPTION OF FATHERHOOD: CRAFTING A FORWARD-THINKING AGENDA

From the great variety of ideas and opinions expressed in the focus group meetings, NCOFF staff identified several themes which ran through all of the meetings. Some of the most compelling issues seemed to be commonly known realities of service provision to fathers and families. The participants' comments suggested seven specific themes that will be taken into consideration in crafting additional Core Learnings and reworking the text of the current Learnings. These themes are as follows:

1. Education and literacy are vital to enhance fathers' and families' personal development, strengthen employment options, and contribute positively to children's development.
2. The absence of strong models of fatherhood and uninformed perceptions of fatherhood weaken the possibilities for positive father involvement.
3. Fathers and families who have experienced intergenerational hardship and social isolation, particularly those living in conditions of poverty, homelessness, family violence, and incarceration, need a range of social, educational, and human supports to make the transition to committed parents and thriving families.
4. Fathers' beliefs about men's roles, family structure, and family functioning are affected by and affect a variety of cultural practices which differ from group to group and are largely unexplored by the field.
5. The transition to parenthood provides an opportunity for emotional and spiritual growth; many young fathers and mothers find new meaning in life as they struggle to live up to the responsibilities of their new roles.
6. To achieve greater father involvement and responsible parenting, communities and their institutions need to be more assertive in demonstrating their commitment to children's well-being and their support of families.
7. Future and first-time fathers need directed support in preparing to guide children's development within the home, school, and community contexts in which they will live and grow.

As we reflect on the participants' comments and the Core Learnings, we are reminded of the complexity of issues and variety of choices facing parents today. One of the greatest achievements of this century is arguably the increase in the options available to the ordinary citizen. It may sometimes appear that people have too many options. For instance, fathers can choose to be or not to be part of their children's lives, and mothers can choose to allow or not to allow fathers access to their children. A closer look, however, may reveal that parenting behavior is as constrained now as it was in the past—only differently. For instance, young fathers in the inner city are deterred from involvement with their children by tremendous peer pressure to avoid a commitment to family life. Further, if increased father absence is viewed as a result of increased personal choice and a weakening of traditional norms, so too, should the finding that more men than ever are becoming involved intimately in the daily caregiving of their children.

A more optimistic view takes into account not only increasing rates of father absence, but also increasing rates of active father involvement. The task for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers then becomes one of showing people both how to maximize their options and how to make responsible choices.

Participants in these focus groups emphasized that there is a real need for research that informs practice. Practitioners' experiences have formed and continue to form the basis of much of NCOFF's work. NCOFF has taken a multifaceted approach to bridging the gap between research and practice, including: (1) polling and reporting on the needs and concerns of practitioners, (2) bringing together practitioners with researchers and policymakers to discuss key issues of common interest, (3) encouraging and supporting new practice-focused research efforts, and (4) increasing the accessibility of research to the field. Within the meetings, practitioners challenged NCOFF and the field to use their knowledge and Core Learnings effectively. Through this report and subsequent reports of our findings from a survey of programs nationwide and an ethnography of practice, it is our aim to provide practitioners with research that responds directly to the issues facing their programs—issues that are embedded in the Core Learnings—and to deepen research and policy.



APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP MEETING DISCUSSION GUIDE

The NCOFF Focus Group Series on Fathers and Families Practice
Summer 1996
National Center on Fathers and Families
University of Pennsylvania

Questions

Please read the following and reflect on the questions in the boxes below, particularly as they relate to your experiences as a participant.

Research

The National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) intends to pursue a research agenda that is practice-focused and practice-derived. Our work with the Philadelphia Children's Network (PCN) and participants around the country produced seven Core Learnings around which NCOFF's research agenda is organized:

1. Fathers care (even if that caring is not always shown in conventional ways).
2. Fathers matter (in terms of economic well-being, social support and child development).
3. Joblessness is a major impediment to family formation and father involvement.
4. Existing approaches to public benefits, child support enforcement and paternity establishment operate to provide obstacles and disincentives to father involvement. Moreover, the disincentives are sufficiently compelling as to have prompted the emergence of a phenomenon dubbed "underground fathers"—men who acknowledge paternity and are involved in the lives of their children but who refuse to participate as fathers in the formal systems.
5. A growing number of young fathers and mothers need additional support to develop the skills they will need to share the responsibility for parenting.
6. The transition from biological father to committed parent has significant developmental implications for young fathers.
7. The behaviors of young parents, both fathers and mothers, are influenced significantly by intergenerational beliefs and practices within families of origin.

1. Please indicate whether and to what extent these "learnings" are consistent with, different from, or contradicted by your expertise, program experience, or intuition.
2. Drawing on your own work, experience, and intuition, please list 3-5 other learnings

and/or questions that you would wish to have placed on the research agenda. In other words, what do we need to know?

Policy

The Core Learnings cited above in 1994 prompted several participants in programs throughout the country to urge significant changes in the public assistance (esp. AFDC), paternity establishment and child support enforcement policies. These participants proposed that public policies:

- unhook paternity establishment processes from child support enforcement
- abandon the distinction between “custodial” and “noncustodial” parents insofar as benefits are concerned
- substantially increase the child support “pass through” to AFDC-receiving parents
- use the child support enforcement system as a case-finding mechanism while de-emphasizing its collection and punitive aspects
- provide “amnesty” from arrears for fathers who wish to declare paternity but are discouraged from doing so due to arrears
- promote and facilitate voluntary paternity establishment
- encourage and even require mediation and counseling as essential components of the paternity establishment and child support enforcement processes
- include support for developing and strengthening the co-parenting relationship

3. Which of these “reforms” would you be prepared to support? Why?

4. Given your experience, what, if any, additional policy changes would you advocate?

Practice

Participants, researchers, and policymakers have learned much from the MDRC “Parents Fair Share” and P/PV “Young Unwed Fathers” multi-site demonstrations. For PCN, the most significant additional learnings growing out its experience were those which led to development of the Co-Parenting Education (CoPE) component of its work.

5. What would you describe as the learning(s) from your program that holds the most far-reaching implications for changing practice?



APPENDIX B: PROGRAMS AND AGENCIES REPRESENTED AT FOCUS GROUPS

Adolescent Pregnancy Child Watch, Santa Monica, CA
Atlanta Youth Opportunity Unlimited, Atlanta, GA
Baltimore City Healthy Start, Baltimore, MD
Baltimore Head Start, Baltimore, MD
Baltimore Healthy Start, Baltimore, MD
Chambers County Extension Service, Arahua, TX
Children Now, Los Angeles, CA
Children's Institute International, Los Angeles, CA
Chrysalis, Los Angeles, CA
Coalition of Parents Support, Palmdale, CA
Employment Action Center, Minneapolis, MN
Episcopal Community Services, Minneapolis, MN
Families First, Harris Johnson Center, Atlanta, GA
Father Involvement Program, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA
Fathers Resource Center, Minneapolis, MN
Fathers' Resource Center, Minneapolis, MN
Foothill Family Services, Pasadena, CA
Fort Bend County Extension Service, Rosenberg, TX
Hale County Extension Service, Plainview, TX
Harriet Buhai Center for Family Law, Los Angeles, CA
HEBCAC, The Men's Center, Baltimore, MD
Jefferson County Extension Service, Beaumont, TX
Lakes Area Children, Youth & Family Services, Forest Lake, MN
Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office, Bureau of Family Support Operations, Los Angeles, CA
Lutheran Social Services, Minneapolis, MN
Male Advocacy for Children in the Delaware Valley, Philadelphia, PA
Male Involvement Program, Philadelphia, PA
Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, San Francisco, CA
Men and Fathers Center, Duluth, MN
Minneapolis Schools, Early Childhood Family Education, Minneapolis, MN
Minnesota Association of Runaway Youth Services, Minneapolis, MN
Minnesota Early Learning Design Center, Minneapolis, MN
Montebello Unified School District, Montebello, CA
My Child Says Daddy, Los Angeles, CA
National Practitioners Network for Fathers and Families, Families and Work Institute, New York, NY
Northeast Neighborhood Early Learning, Minneapolis, MN
Northwest Youth and Family Services, Minneapolis, MN
Philadelphia Dept. of Human Services, Children and Youth Division, Philadelphia, PA
Philadelphia School District, Family Support, Philadelphia, PA
PICA/Head Start, Minneapolis, MN
Pillsbury Neighborhood Services, Minneapolis, MN
Positive Generations, Inc., Atlanta, GA
Prairie View A & M Extension Service, Houston, TX
Reaching Out for the Brothers, Philadelphia, PA
Reuben Lindh Learning Center, Minneapolis, MN
Sabathani Community Center, Minneapolis, MN
Saturday Institute for Manhood and Brotherhood Actualization, Atlanta, GA
Sinai Hospital - New Bridges Fatherhood Program, Baltimore, MD
Southeastern Regional Vision for Education, Inc., Atlanta, GA
Southern Education Foundation, Atlanta, GA
St. Bernadine's Head Start, Baltimore, MD
Texas Agricultural Extension Service, Graham, TX
The Fatherhood Project, Families and Work Institute, New York, NY
Urban Ventures Center for Fathering, Minneapolis, MN
Vanguard/Black Teens for Advancement, Atlanta, GA
Young Dads Program, Van Nuys, CA
Young Fathers Program, YWCA, Harlem, NY
Young Fathers/ Responsible Fathers, Dept. of Human Services, Baltimore, MD



Nondiscrimination Statement

The University of Pennsylvania values diversity and seeks talented students, faculty and staff from diverse backgrounds. The University of Pennsylvania does not discriminate on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation, religion, color, national or ethnic origin, age, disability, or status as a Vietnam Era Veteran or disabled veteran in the administration of educational policies, programs, or activities; admissions policies; scholarship and loan awards; athletic, or University administered programs or employment. Questions or complaints regarding this policy should be directed to: Executive Director, Office of Affirmative Action, 1133 Blockley Hall, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6021 or (215) 898-6993 (Voice) or (215) 898-7803 (TDD).



45

BEST COPY AVAILABLE



U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)



NOTICE

Reproduction Basis



This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.



This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").

EFF-089 (3/2000)