

RESPONSIBLE FATHERHOOD

Position Statement

NASW, Iowa Chapter, believes children in the state of Iowa should have the benefit of two positive, active involved parents and that the state of Iowa should support parents' involvement by enacting laws that promote and enhance the parent-child relationship, regardless of marital or residential status. However, NASW, Iowa Chapter, also recognizes there are times when such involvement is contraindicated, such as in cases of child abuse or neglect or domestic violence. In these cases, the well being and safety of the children and mother are paramount.

Discussion

Responsible fatherhood is defined as delaying fatherhood until a man is emotionally and financially ready, to establish paternity, demonstrate active involvement in the child's life, regardless of marital status, support the child financially, and co-parent with the mother (Doherty, Kouneski, and Erickson, 1996). In addition, responsible fatherhood emphasizes positive involvement, such as participating in nurturing activities and appropriately disciplining the child as well as developing a positive working relationship with the child's mother.

In Iowa, children are increasingly growing up in homes with a parent absent. In 2006, 26% of Iowa's children under the age of 18 lived in single parent homes. Of these, 19% lived in single mother households while 6% lived in single father households (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2008). Fifty-two percent of divorces in 2005 involved families with children under the age of 18 (Iowa Department of Public Health (IDPH), 2005).

Responsible fatherhood encourages fathers' positive, active involvement, which benefits children and their mothers. For example, children whose fathers are involved in their lives experience "...more success in their academic, social, and emotional lives...{and are} more popular with peers..." (Jones & Benda, 2004). Fathers encourage their children to be more independent and competitive as well as giving their children "...a sense of emotional support..." (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). In addition, increased responsible father involvement enhances maternal parenting, which in turn yields benefits for children, such as "...better adaptive language abilities and fewer behavior problems..." (Jackson & Scheines, 2005).

Although not all children suffer consequences from growing up without a father in their lives, social science research affirms the consequences for children when their fathers are absent. For example, children who grow up without a responsible father experience a higher rate of dropping out of school, more delinquent behavior, and more out-of-wedlock births (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). In 2005, 33 out of every 1,000 Iowa young women, age 15 to 19, gave birth to a child (Kids Count Data Book, 2008). In addition, 2006 statistics show that Iowa's out-of-wedlock births comprised 33% of all live births (IDPH, 2006). Children also are at higher risk for poverty. For example, in 2007, 37.1% of Iowa's single female head of households with children under age 18 lived in poverty with that number increasing to 43.4% for single female households with children under the age of 5. This compares to 4.4% and 5.1% of Iowa's married couples with children under 18 and 5 respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Furthermore, for boys, the quality of the father-son relationship impacts their empathy development. Sexual offending and aggressive behavior in boys is associated with low levels of empathy (Hunter, Figueredo, Becker & Malamuth, 2007). Lastly, a responsible father's absence also is a strong predictor of his adolescent's alcohol usage when coupled with "...problems relating to him, less attachment to him, limited caregiver monitoring, and less spirituality" (Jones & Benda, 2004).

There are numerous reasons why a father may not be involved in the lives of his children. He may be experiencing mental health and/or substance abuse issues, health concerns, or lack of adequate food or shelter. He may have a history of domestic violence. He may be under or unemployed, incarcerated, or have child support payment and collection issues. Furthermore, the quality of the relationship between the father and mother can be a barrier to his involvement, especially if the relationship ended less than amicably or if the parents are in dispute over custody or visitation. Research shows mothers are the "gatekeepers" for fathers' involvement with their children.

In Iowa, fathers experience several barriers to positive, active involvement in the lives of their children. For example, even though child support is assessed and enforced, unwed fathers must prove they have a significant relationship with the child to pursue visitation through the courts. This may prove difficult if the mother denies the father access to the child until ordered to do so by the court. Furthermore, many fathers cannot afford to pay an attorney to pursue court ordered visitation. In addition, as previously stated, many fathers find it difficult to meet their own basic needs, which may hinder their involvement with their children. In 2006, 21% of Iowa's fathers assessed child support received Food Assistance and Medicaid (Iowa Department of Human Services, 2007). Furthermore, many low-income fathers may not meet government assistance eligibility criteria while at the same time remaining below or slightly above the poverty level. Additionally, payment of child support leaves many fathers with little money to support themselves let alone provide a suitable environment for their children.

In current Iowa law, non-custodial parents are not supported in their role as parents. For example, in Chapter 600 of the Iowa Code, non-custodial parents' time with their children is conceptualized as "visitation". However, the word "visitation" does not adequately represent all that non-custodial parents do with their children nor does it support their roles as parents to their children. Parents, whether custodial or non-custodial, are responsible for parenting their children. In addition, as previously stated, in cases where the parents were never married, non-custodial fathers are assessed child support, even though they must separately petition the court for visitation, "parenting time", rights. However, the Iowa Department of Human Services' Child Support Recovery Unit cannot link visitation, "parenting time", with the process of setting up child support payments as it would compromise federal funding of the child support program. Therefore, a mechanism needs to be established that will ensure that unmarried non-custodial parents, primarily fathers, are notified of their rights to visitation and provided a means to pursue such rights in a court of law. Currently, pro se forms are available only for divorce proceedings when there are no children involved.

Recommendations

NASW affirms the following policy recommendations:

- Replace "visitation" with "parenting time" in the Iowa Code to reaffirm that non-custodial parents are parents of their children, regardless of their marital or residential status. Several states have already made this change, including Colorado, Wisconsin, and Indiana.
- Provide a mechanism for unwed, non-custodial parents to initiate custody and parenting time proceedings when a child support order is executed.
- Provide pro se forms to initiate and/or review child custody and parenting time proceedings.
- Provide a systematic review of parenting time plans when changes occur in either parent's life.
- Expand access to low cost or free mental health, substance abuse, and medical services for low-income parents.
- Advocate that child support guidelines include a reserve to allow the non-custodial parent to meet their own basic living expenses in accordance with the cost of living for that household size.

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