# Shared Caretaking in Disadvantaged Families:

# When Are Fathers Involved and What Does This Mean to Parents?*

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# When Are Fathers Involved and What Does This Mean to Parents?

This analysis draws on two waves of in-depth interviews with mothers and fathers when their child was age one and four to provide new information about fathers' co-parenting in low-income families. Interviews with new parents living in California suggest that three types of co-parenting situations emerged early in their child's life which were related to the status of their relationship as a couple and to the relative economic and personal stability of each parent. These co-parenting situations were often perceived differently by parents who framed stable co-parenting as a commitment, early co-parenting as an exchange of resources, and later co-parenting as compensation for mothers' reduced share in parenting. Particular preferences for child support, custody, and visitation also appeared within each situation, with implications for policies directed toward low-income families.

During a period in which the real wages of men were falling, women were entering the paid labor force in increasing numbers, and single parent families were on the rise, scholars observed a growing rift between involved fathers who were becoming more equal partners in parenthood and uninvolved fathers who were retreating from family responsibilities (Furstenberg 1988; Gerson 1993). Frank Furstenberg (1988) suggested that these divergent trends could be attributed to changes in the gender division of labor which gave men more opportunity to assume domestic and child care responsibilities as well as to withdraw from their children. In further investigations of this issue, researchers interested in understanding the shift toward increased involvement tended to focus on fathers in intact, middle class families who opted to share parenting responsibilities with women (e.g., Coltrane 1989; 1996; Radin 1994). In contrast, researchers concerned with the social and policy implications of paternal disengagement typically turned their attention to low-income, nonresident fathers (e.g., Garfinkel, McLanahan, and Hanson 1998).

The focus on disengagement among low-income fathers is understandable in light of data which indicate many men lose contact with their children following a divorce or nonmarital birth, with important consequences for their children's economic wellbeing (e.g., Argys, et al. 2006). At the same time, information from qualitative research suggests that low-income fathers are involved with their children in ways which have not been fully captured by survey or administrative data and that they often embrace ideals of involved fatherhood documented among higher income men (Hamer and Marchioro 2002; Nelson 2004; Waller 2002). However, limited research has examined fathers' participation in co-parenting in lower-income families during the early years of their child's life (Arendell 1999).

There are several reasons this issue has not received more empirical attention. Low-income, nonresident and unmarried fathers have been underrepresented in many national

household surveys (Garfinkel, et al. 1998). Because co-parenting has not typically been a central focus of those studies that do include low-income fathers, measures of men's participation in co-parenting have been relatively limited, particularly when this involvement is negotiated through an informal agreement with the mother. Surveys also tend to measure the involvement of residential and nonresidential fathers differently (Arendell 1999). Therefore, it can be difficult to detect and track men's involvement in co-parenting if they move between residential and nonresidential statuses.

This paper draws on two waves of in-depth interviews with 62 new mothers and fathers living in low-income families living in Oakland, California to examine fathers' participation in co-parenting in the first four years of their child's life. In particular, it provides new information about the circumstances in which fathers co-parent during this time, the frames parents use to interpret fathers' caretaking, and the preferences for legal child support and custody which emerge within different co-parenting situations. While most previous studies of co-parenting have examined the experiences of higher income couples in the context of marriage, this study shifts the focus to lower-income couples in more diverse families. Much of the research on father involvement has also used cross-sectional reports of involvement from one parent, typically the mother (but see Coley and Chase-Lansdale 1999 for an exception). By utilizing a unique set of longitudinal qualitative interviews with mothers and fathers of the same child who participated in the Fragile Families Study, this analysis is also able to include information from both parents and to follow changes in fathers' involvement in co-parenting during a critical time in their child's life. The in-depth nature of the interview data also reveals some unexpected contexts and patterns of co-parenting and makes it possible to examine how parents understand the meaning and implications of co-parenting in their lives.

The results from these interviews with new parents indicate three different types of co-parenting situations emerged within four years of their child's birth which were related to the status of their relationship as a couple and to the relative economic and personal stability of mothers and fathers. Each co-parenting situation was perceived differently by parents who often framed stable co-parenting as a commitment, early co-parenting as an exchange of resources, and later co-parenting as compensation for mothers' reduced share in parenting. Parents' preferences for child support, custody, and visitation also varied with the timing and duration of fathers' involvement in co-parenting, with implications for policies directed toward low-income families.

**Co-Parenting through High Father Involvement, Shared Caretaking, and Cooperation**

*High Father Involvement* The term co-parenting has been defined in different ways in the literature, and co-parenting among resident and nonresident fathers has typically been investigated in separate studies (Arendell 1999). One important way scholars have thought about co-parenting is in regard to fathers' high absolute or relative involvement with their children (Radin 1994). Pleck's (1997) extensive review of research on fathers in two-parent families suggests that paternal involvement increased in recent decades in absolute terms and in relation to mothers' involvement. In particular, fathers' engagement, or direct interactions with children, was reported to be about two-fifths of mothers, and fathers' accessibility to children, was reported to be about two-thirds of mothers. Fathers were reported to have the lowest level of involvement in regard to taking responsibility for children's welfare (see also Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine 1987). Although most research on residential fathers' involvement has focused on married couples, one recent study by Hofferth and Anderson (2003) shows that cohabiting fathers participate in similar activities with, and are as accessible to, their children as married fathers, but are reported to have lower engagement. Previous research has not shown consistent socio-economic and race-ethnic differences in paternal involvement, but some

maternal characteristics, like employment and age, appear to be positively related to involvement (Pleck 1997).

Studies of men who live apart from their children typically show that the involvement of nonresident fathers declines over time. For example, a recent comparison of evidence from several large-scale surveys indicates that most nonresident fathers are in contact with their children under five and see them several days each month, but that contact is considerably lower for adolescent children (Arygs, et al. 2006). This is consistent with previous qualitative research on low-income families which suggests that fathers are often an important presence in the lives of their young children, have close affective relationships with them, and place a high value on their identity as fathers but may disengage from their children in response to a variety of personal and inter-personal challenges (Hamer 2001; Nelson 2004; Roy 2006; Waller 2002). One important challenge for fathers seems be maintaining a relationship with the child after their romantic relationship with the mother dissolves. The involvement of previously married fathers with their children has been shown to change substantially following divorce (Arendell 1995; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991). Among unmarried fathers, involvement also seems to be highly sensitive to the status and quality of parents' relationships (Carlson and McLanahan 2002; Coley and Chase-Lansdale 1999; Johnson 2001).

Although much less attention has been given to stability or positive changes in paternal involvement, Manning and Smock (1999) report that about ¼ of nonresident fathers in the NSFH increased their contact with children over time. Of particular relevance for the present study, Coley and Chase-Lansdale (1999) also find that about 40% of unmarried African-American fathers in their Baltimore study moved into or out of active parenting between birth and preschool, with 18% becoming more involved with their children.

*Shared Caretaking* A second way researchers have thought about co-parenting is in regard to situations where fathers share caretaking responsibilities for children with mothers (e.g., Deutsch 1999; Ehrensaft 1987; Radin 1994). Although women report taking on a disproportionate share of primary caretaking, evidence from time diaries indicates that men have increased their participation in child care in the last two decades following changes in women's employment outside the home (Bianchi 2000). Researchers have also been interested in the circumstances and consequences of fathers' shared caretaking and the social construction of these arrangements. These studies typically show that a combination of personal and structural opportunities and constraints come together to facilitate shared parenting. Once in place, shared parenting arrangements can have important implications for how fathers view themselves as parents and for other areas of their lives (Arendell 1995; Gerson 1993). For example, Coltrane's (1989; 1996) study of middle-class couples suggests that shared parenting was often a practical response to time constraints in dual income families, but fathers' routine practices of sharing child care transformed men and led parents to construct an image of the father as a sensitive and competent caregiver.

An important situation in which fathers are sharing parenting responsibilities with mothers may be when they care for young children while mothers are at work. Between 1965 and 1993, Casper and O'Connell (1998) report that close to one out of five preschool children with employed mothers were cared for by fathers during mothers' working hours, with the likelihood of doing so increasing during a recession year. There is a growing body of evidence that mothers' and fathers' work schedules are related to fathers' participation in child care and that paternal child care is more common in situations where parents work different shifts (Averett, Gennetian, and Peters 2000; Casper and O'Connell 1998; Glass 1998; Presser 1988). Women who face work requirements while receiving welfare are particularly likely to have non-

standard shifts and may rely on informal sources of care, such as fathers (Presser and Cox 1997). If fathers who provide early child care are more likely to remain active parents as some evidence suggests (Aldous, Mulligan, and Bjarnason 1998), this experience may also have implications for how they view their caretaking relationships with children later.

A more common circumstance in which nonresident fathers may be highly involved in caretaking is in the context of visitation and custody (Insabell, Williams, and Pruett 2003). About 14% of single parent families are now headed by fathers (Casper and Bianchi 2002). Although single father families are more likely to be headed by divorced and higher income men, an increased proportion of single fathers have never been married (Casper and Bianchi 2002) and a significant minority live in poverty (Meyer and Garasky 1993). Some of the growth in single father families in recent years may be due to an increase in shared custody agreements (Cancian and Meyer 1998), but it is still less common for fathers to be awarded shared physical custody than to receive shared legal custody which gives them a formal right to participate in decision-making for their children (Seltzer 1998).

In low-income families, parents are much less likely to have an opportunity to establish legal visitation and custody agreements than child support agreements, particularly if they are unmarried (Boggess 2003). In part, this is because mothers are required to cooperate with requirements to identify the father and establish a child support order when receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), but visitation and custody have not been tied to welfare regulations in this way. Although research on visitation and custody arrangements in low-income communities is limited, one qualitative study by Hamer and Marchioro (2002) suggests that fathers became custodial parents in response to unexpected circumstances, such as when mothers relinquished this role and when child welfare agencies removed the child from the mother's home. For fathers in this study, support from other family members helped them adapt

to this role and identity, but the practice of assuming custody informally made it harder for them to be legally recognized as primary caretakers later for the purposes of receiving public assistance. Other research suggests that the practice of low-income fathers supporting their children informally when they are living with them may also make calculations of their child support obligation more complicated (Waller 2002).

*Cooperation* A third way researchers have approached co-parenting is by looking at cooperation and communication over parenting. Previous studies have observed whether parents support rather than undermine their spouse's parenting in intact families (Belsky, Crnic, and Gable 1995; Margolin, Gordis, and John 2001; Strait and Bales 2003) as well as how they cooperate to care for their children following a divorce (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Maccoby and Mnookin 1992). Of particular interest for this study is Sobolewski and King's (2005) finding that cooperative parenting facilitates paternal contact which, in turn, leads to higher quality and more responsive fathering.

As this review suggests, researchers have focused on different aspects of paternal involvement and co-parenting, reflecting not only the multidimensionality of these concepts but also the diversity of methodological approaches, disciplinary backgrounds, and political orientations of researchers who study them (Arendell 1999; Palkovitz 2002; Pleck 1997). Consistent with some previous qualitative work on shared parenting, my focus in this paper is on investigating how parents describe the contexts and meanings of fathers' co-parenting rather than on measuring these concepts at a micro level. Fathers' involvement in co-parenting is highlighted because many men disengage from their families over time, with important implications for the lives of their children. In this analysis, I am particularly interested in the experiences of fathers who are highly engaged with and accessible to their children as shared

caretakers (Lamb, et al. 1987) but also try to take into account how caretaking may be sensitive to transitions in parents' relationships.

**Data and Methods**

To investigate co-parenting in low-income families, this analysis draws on two waves of intensive, qualitative interviews I conducted with 62 new mothers and fathers in Oakland, California. Because co-parenting has been relatively unexplored in low-income families, in-depth qualitative information is particularly well suited for capturing and communicating how co-parenting practices cohere and take on meaning for parents in this group (Patton 2002). Qualitative interview data are appropriate for investigating how people interpret their experiences and for integrating the perspectives of multiple research participants (Weiss 1994). Taken together, this information offers a holistic and contextualized picture of new parents' experiences as they unfold naturally (Patton 2002). Indeed, in-depth interviews with parents allowed me to see new patterns of co-parenting I did not observe in previous survey or administrative data as well as to understand the meaning of these practices for families.

In this project, new mothers and fathers of the same child were interviewed when their child was about age 1 and 4. The interview was conducted as a guided conversation following a semi-structured "tree and branch" design to gather data on a similar set of topics across interviews while encouraging new information to emerge within each interview (Rubin and Rubin 1995; Weiss 1994). This approach allowed me to establish rapport with participants and to obtain a sufficient level of depth and density of information. I conducted almost all of the 109 interviews in this project myself in order to ensure information with research participants was fully developed during the process of data collection (Weiss 1994).[1] Prolonged engagement in the field also gives researchers an important context to interpret the data and to identify nuanced

[1] A bilingual male research assistant conducted interviews with four fathers in Spanish.

meanings and processes (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Charmaz 2001). Mothers and fathers were interviewed separately. Most interviews took place in parents' homes and lasted about 90 minutes at each of the two interviews (180 minutes total).

*Sample* The 62 mothers and fathers in this qualitative study were randomly selected from a larger sample of parents who participated in the Oakland, California site of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. The Fragile Families Study was designed to be representative of parents who had a nonmarital birth in each city in the study, and to include a comparison group of married parents who had children at the same time and in the same hospitals (see Reichman, et al. 2001). To select parents for this qualitative study, I stratified the Oakland Fragile Families sample by the three largest race/ethnic groups (i.e, non-Hispanic black, Hispanic of Mexican descent, and non-Hispanic white) and selected a random (10%) sample of marital and nonmarital births within these strata. Fathers were not eligible to participate in the Fragile Families Study if the mother of their child did not participate in the baseline survey. Therefore, about ¾ of families selected for the qualitative study were mother-father cases, while ¼ were mother-only cases. About 86% of mothers and 88% of fathers in this group agreed to participate in the first qualitative interview which took place in 1998-1999. As in the larger study, mothers were more likely to participate in the follow-up interview than fathers (85% vs. 70%).

**Table 1 about here**

As shown in Table 1, the majority of parents in the study were in their mid-twenties when they had their child and were disproportionately African-American or Latino. Most parents did not have education beyond high school. They also had had low wages and median incomes at the time of their child's birth, with mothers reporting about $7,500 in income from work and

public assistance and fathers reporting earnings of about $12,500.[2] About 31% of parents were married at the time of their child's birth, 40% were cohabiting, 17% had a (nonmarital) relationship but were living apart, and 11% were no longer in a relationship.

*Analysis* All interviews were recorded and transcribed for data analysis. I used a qualitative data analysis program (Atlas ti) to code substantive and conceptual themes in the data. Focused codes for fathers' co-parenting were developed inductively, after initial, line-by-line coding of each interview (Charmaz 2001). Interviews were then sorted by codes related to co-parenting within and across interviews, and information from both interviews was combined to examine changes in fathers' caretaking over time. I also used matrix displays and analytical memos to help identify patterns in co-parenting and obtain a more complete picture of these changes (Charmaz 2001; Miles and Huberman 1994; Weiss 1994). Techniques such as prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and triangulation of information reported at each wave and from mothers and fathers were also used to promote credibility and validity (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

*Overview and Approach* Parents' accounts suggest that many fathers were involved in co-parenting at some point in the first four years, but the timing and duration of these arrangements varied in the following ways: 1) Fathers who acted as *stable co-parents* shared caretaking with the mother throughout the first four years of their child's life (17%); 2) *early co-parents* shared parenting during the first year only (23%); and 3) *later co-parents* (17%), had limited involvement in the first year but had become highly involved caretaking by the time their child was age four (see Table 2). In the remaining families, mothers were identified as primary caretakers and were either coupled with fathers who acted as family *breadwinners* (23%) or with

[2] Compared to the national Fragile Families sample, the Oakland survey and qualitative samples have a larger representation of Latino parents and are of slightly lower socioeconomic status. Married parents in the study are also more likely than unmarried parents to be white and to have higher socio-economic status (results available upon request).

*disengaged* fathers (20%) who lived apart from their child and had relatively limited involvement with them (Arendell 1995; Gerson 1993). In the analysis that follows, I examine these stable, early, and later co-parenting situations. Because the meaning of stable co-parenting can be understood in relation to other types of stable father involvement, information from fathers who were involved as breadwinners during the first four years is brought in at times for purposes of comparison. The situations of fathers who were disengaged during this period are not considered because questions explored in this analysis were less relevant for them. Although fathers in each race-ethnic group participated in co-parenting, I also found that nonwhite fathers were somewhat more involved in co-parenting at some point than white fathers. Therefore, many of the examples presented below are from families headed by African American and Latino parents. Within this group of co-parenting fathers, African-American parents were more often early co-parents, and Latino fathers were more often later co-parents.

To understand why co-parenting emerged at some times but not others, the analysis begins by identifying the contexts in which each type of co-parenting appeared within the first four years. Next, I examine how parents themselves framed these arrangements. Frames may be thought of as filters through which parents jointly interpreted their situations (Goffman 1974; Small 2002). Finally, I investigate how these contexts and frames were related to parents' preferences for child support, custody, and visitation agreements when their child was age four.

**Contexts**

All fathers who were involved in co-parenting shared caretaking responsibilities with mothers at some point during the first four years, but they did so in somewhat different circumstances. Parents' accounts suggest that the way fathers participated in co-parenting was closely related to the status of their relationship as a couple during this time. Variations in co-parenting also reflected each parent's relative employment situation and personal stability.

*Stable Co-parents*. According to both partners' reports, fathers who were stable co-parents performed either a "50-50" or "40-60" share of caretaking in the first year (Deutsch 1999) and shared most parenting activities by age four that involved direct interaction with the child, such as providing care and disciplining the child. Parents said that these fathers' accessibility to their child was also high in absolute terms and relative to mothers (Lamb et al. 1987), and often involved watching the child on a daily basis either in the presence of mothers or on their own. In the words of a mother whose partner worked the late shift and took care of their daughter during the day while she was at work: "He's a great father…a 10 on a scale of 10...he makes sure that he's around wherever she is." Like other fathers who were involved as caretakers throughout this time, Bob emphasized the benefits of participating in his child's daily life: "I like to just observe her…because it's a beautiful experience, like you're growing with them. You get to see how they are, how they react to a given situation, from day to day."

**Table 2 about here**

Previous research suggests that a particular set of opportunities and constraints may come together in parents' lives to make shared parenting more likely in working and middle-class families (Arendell 1995; Gerson 1993). Similarly, parents in this study said that fathers typically co-parented throughout the first four years in situations where they were living with the mother and their child in the context of a cohabiting or marital relationship (see Table 2). Consistent with research on dual-income couples, I find that some fathers acted as caretakers to their children throughout the first four years when both partners were working full-time. In addition, stable co-parenting appeared in circumstances where both partners were looking for work, a situation that has received much less empirical attention. As one unemployed mother described: "We both take care of the baby. Most of the time, he wants to take care of the baby, and let me go find a job. Or he says "it's my turn." [to look for a job]. We take turns."

The first time I interviewed Hope, she suggested Joaquin, her partner, took a 50-50 share of caring for their child while she received welfare and he was out of work. According to Hope, living in the same household with the child also allowed him to participate in similar direct care activities, such as, "changing their son's diapers, changing his clothes, making his bottles…He loves him to death, and I don't think there's anything he wouldn't do for him." Three years later, Joaquin, her partner, explained that they continued to coordinate the discipline and direct care of their four year old son after she had gone back to work full time as a housekeeper and he worked under-the-table at his brother's auto repair shop:

> I'm the one with the teeth brushed and stuff like that. [Getting him] dressed and the bath, we'll do it together. Take turns. If she's too tired, I'll do it. If I'm tired, she'll do it. So we work with it together.

Fathers' participation in these co-parenting arrangements contrasted with breadwinning situations where parents lived together throughout the first four years but mothers did 80-100% of the caretaking while the father worked full time. Unlike co-parents, these couples reported sharing few parenting activities apart from general decisions about childrearing when their child was age four. As Howard, a breadwinning father, explains: "For the most part, I let her deal with raising [our daughter]. I do have a lot of input, but for the most part, that's Mommy's deal….Mommy pretty much takes care of everything with her right now."

*Early Co-Parents* Like stable co-parenting fathers, men involved in early co-parenting initially lived with the mother and their child and were highly accessible to and engaged with children as caretakers. Early co-parenting fathers were typically unemployed the year after their child was born and were sometimes coupled with partners working full time. In these situations, early co-parents acted as the child's primary or secondary child care provider. Marie, a mother whose partner watched their child full time in the first year explains: "I couldn't have asked for a

better husband for a better father for my children because he watches them while I go to school and go to work." Tony, Marie's husband describes the situation this way:

> I'm the one taking care of both of them… it's something that a lot of men don't do, or don't have the opportunity to do…Instead of being the 9-5 father, and coming home and having a couple of minutes or an hour or two with them, take the whole day with them.

Early co-parenting fathers had typically dissolved their relationship with the child's mother by year four and transitioned out of a caretaking role some time after they moved out of the household (see Table 2). Although previous research suggests that nonresident fathers tend to reduce contact with their child over time, it is striking that these fathers who had limited involvement and shared few parenting responsibilities with the mother had assumed a nearly equal share of caretaking in the first year by parents' accounts. John comments on this change: "I miss being with my son all night, taking care of him when he wake up crying. I want him to open his eyes and see me. 'Okay, that's that man again.'"

In the years after their relationships with the mother dissolved, most early co-parenting fathers still struggled to find stable employment. In comparison to the mothers of their children and to stable co-parenting fathers, they were also more likely to continue to experience personal challenges such as incarceration or substance use problems. Although these men had perhaps more opportunity than the average father to spend time with their child in the first year when they were out of work, fathers' unemployment and personal instability represented important barriers to contact after the relationship ended. Most also had conflictual relationships with the mother by year four, prompting them to spend less time with their child and sometimes "disappear" for several months at a stretch. Mercedes, the mother of John's child, said that his involvement continued to deteriorate following repeated stints in prison and disagreements with her over child support:

> He could be a great dad, if he really wanted to be. He could be a great dad. I don't know what it is… There's been times where [our son] ask [if] his dad love him, if his dad gonna come pick him up when he say he is. I say, "I really don't know if he gonna come pick you up like he say he is, but we gonna wait and see. We gonna wait and see"…If he was to come and try and pick him up this weekend, [our son's] gonna cry not to go because he hasn't seen him in a while. He used to come get him like every other weekend last year. And [our son] was getting attached to him…and he just broke that, because he went to jail again last year.

*Later Co-Parents* What is perhaps even more surprising is that some men who were relatively uninvolved with their child in the first year became involved in caretaking later, even after their relationships with the child's mother had dissolved (see Table 2). By the time their child was age four, fathers engaged in later co-parenting began spending more time with their child through regular, overnight visits or by taking the child into their homes. Fathers typically became later co-parents in response to a change in the mother's work or personal circumstances that made it more difficult for her to act as the child's sole caretaker, including having another child, losing a job or apartment, or entering a drug rehabilitation program. At the same time, these fathers experienced a voluntary or involuntary change in circumstances which improved their employment or personal stability relative to mothers and allowed them to take on a larger parenting role. The situations of later co-parents at the second interview differed not only from mothers but from early co-parenting fathers who continued to experience major economic or personal challenges or were structurally constrained from seeing their child due to incarceration.

Although parents suggested that financial stability allowed fathers to become more active caretakers, they could not be working so many hours that they were unavailable to do things like pick them up from day care or make dinner for them. In fact, a few later co-parenting fathers said they changed jobs in order to spend evenings and weekends with their child. These fathers also had to be able to provide a place for their child to stay, often by sharing a residence with a new partner or other family members (Hamer and Marchioro 2002). Teresa explains how her

children's father took care of them every weekend at his mother's house after he was released from prison:

> He's doing good now. He's out of trouble, he's been working since he came back…he stays [at his mom's house] for the weekend to be what the girls…Now he's doing the same thing [with them] I do over here at home… He probably opened up his eyes and see what he missed out on. He missed out on their first words, first steps, first days at school and so on.

Although these accounts suggest that parenting arrangements were fluid in the first few years, close to half of fathers were engaged in co-parenting at some point during this time. From both a sociological and policy perspective, it is interesting to note that close to ¼ of the fathers in this study provided regular child care for their child at some point during the first four years while mothers were working. While only 3 families had legal visitation or custody agreements, about 1/3 of fathers were also spending time regularly with their child in arrangements that resembled shared or sole custody by year 4.

**Frames**

In addition to appearing within different contexts, fathers' involvement in stable, early, and later co-parenting was typically viewed differently by parents. In each situation, mothers and fathers understood this involvement through frames, or filters, which allowed them to make sense of co-parenting and explain these situations to others. These frames also gave their parenting agreements and fathers' involvement with their child meaning (Goffman 1974; Small 2002).

*Stable Co-parents* Parents' involved in stable co-parenting situations said that fathers' agreement to co-parent represented a commitment to remain involved as caretaker, regardless of the challenges they faced in their own lives or in their relationship with the mother (see Table 2). This understanding implied that fathers would try to keep the couple's relationship intact but would also continue to share the work, responsibility, and stress of raising the child should their

relationship dissolve. Previous research suggests higher income parents explain shared parenting in regard to ideas about equity, to children's needs, and, their commitment to the relationship (Coltrane 1989, 1996; Gerson 1993). Parents in this study referred to some of the same ideas to explain fathers' involvement in caretaking throughout the first four years, but did so in a way which reflected their heightened awareness of the fragility of relationships between low-income parents and the negative consequences of paternal disengagement.

Noting that children in their communities were more likely to experience the absence of their fathers from their lives than those in more advantaged contexts, parents suggested that a high level involvement of both parents was important to children's well-being. In addition to encouraging a "balanced" and equitable role for mothers and fathers while they lived in the same household (Coltrane 1989), this strategy also helped ensure that mothers would not later become economically and emotionally overwhelmed by the responsibility of raising a child alone. Like other stable co-parenting fathers, James emphasized both his "love" for parenting and the "hard work" involved:

> I respect single parents to the fullest because it's hard. It's real hard. Especially when the kids is young. But having the momma and father involved is more balanced. Because when [the mother's] tired, that's when I gotta pick up the slack. When I'm down, that's when she gotta pick up the slack. So it ain't always just so much pressure weighing down on one person.

Parents' accounts suggest that fathers' agreement to co-parent was reaffirmed repeatedly over the first four years, and that fathers gained a sense of self-worth and respect by keeping their commitment to the mother and child in the face of difficulties (Gerson 1993). Fathers also drew moral boundaries (Lamont 2000) against less involved fathers, often contrasting their behavior with that of their own absent fathers or of their peers who were unable to "hold it down" by maintaining good relationships with their child's mother or by staying away from situations that could lead to their incarceration or injury. James continues:

> I ain't no super dad or nothing, but I do the best I can…Because my dad died when I was young … [My step-son's] pappy don't even try. He hasn't seen him in like 4 years…Just the mistakes that other people make, you know what I'm saying? That you already know you can't make … I think it's something I have to do because all my mens up here, they look up to me … they respect me to the fullest. They love what I'm doing. They love how I hold it down.

Although the experience of caretaking appeared to strengthen fathers' commitment to parenting (Arendell 1995, Coltrane 1996; Gerson 1993), parents' accounts also suggest there was some selection into stable co-parenting among more highly motivated, confident, and skilled fathers (Pleck 1997). For example, most men in stable co-parenting arrangements responded more positively to the news of pregnancy than the mother. In addition to their strong interest in having a child, fathers said they gained competence as parents from their previous experiences of caring for children. For first time fathers, caring for younger siblings, and acting as father figures for cousins or nephews, gave them confidence in their parenting ability.

> I had to babysit my little brother and sister all the way up, know what I'm saying? So I knew how to raise a kid…I wasn't looking it like fun and games, but I look at it like a challenge (James).

Mothers coupled with stable co-parenting fathers said their partner's active involvement as caretakers set them apart from other men, and they often attributed their involvement with the father to a positive assessment of him as a biological or social father. By acting as a father figure to her child from a previous relationship, Renee said that James demonstrated his interest in parenting and persuaded her to have a child despite some initial reservations:

> He's coming out being a great father….this is his first child but …when I first experienced him being around my oldest one, I was like, "You sure you don't got no kids?" because he always used to come over [and ask] "Can I take the baby to the park?" "Did I have enough money to get the milk?" "Is the bottle warm?"… I thought, that's great. That's really what got me interested in him.

The situation of fathers who maintained stable relationships with mothers and children throughout the first four years as breadwinners rather than co-parents provides an interesting

comparison. These parents tended to use a "specialization and trading" frame to describe their parenting agreement which implied that mothers would focus their efforts on childrearing and fathers would specialize in the labor market activities (Brines and Joyner 1999). In comparison to stable co-parents who emphasized their commitment to sharing the responsibilities of parenting, fathers in this situation also gained respect from mothers and derived a positive sense of themselves as parents by providing for their family's needs. For Mary, the behavior of "real men" like her partner diverged sharply from fathers who were not willing to recognize or support their children.

> If it wasn't for him getting up in the mornings and going to work, we would starve. So I make sure that my children understand that, especially our boys. And make sure that they understand: this is what a father should do. My husband is the ultimate role model for a father.

Parents who had stable co-parenting arrangements also said they valued the fathers' ability to support the family. However, they tended to hold more flexible ideas about how men and women could participate in families than parents like Mary and her partner who specialized in either breadwinning or caretaking (Coltrane 1989). As Mary explains:

> He loves his children. He would do anything for his children. But until they get to a certain age when they're babies, he doesn't interact mostly with them, because he believes that they need me, mostly. I'm the mother. I nurture them, basically, until they develop their personalities.

*Early Co-parents:* In early co-parenting situations, mothers and fathers often suggested that their parenting agreement was based on an equal exchange of resources rather than commitment or specialization (Brines and Joyner 1999). Studies of low income African-American families have described kin-based networks in which family members exchange goods and services to meet immediate family needs. This research often suggests that mothers and children gain access to resources, such as child care, by incorporating fathers and fathers' maternal relatives into these exchanges (Edin and Lein 1997; Stack and Burton 1993). Similarly,

parents in this study who framed early co-parenting as an exchange emphasized child care and other in-kind financial contributions offered by the father and his family. For example, Kimberly said that her partner Gary was taking an equal share in caring for their child in the first year while he was out of work.

> I'm lucky he does that much for him. Most fathers don't… He's done more for that baby than I've seen in a lot of men… Like I said, he cooks, he cleans, he'll do anything.. .[I don't] think it's a mother's job to do everything for a baby. Well, hell, if it was a mother's job, I wouldn't have needed you to make him. That's the way I think. If everything's supposed to be my job, then why do I need you to help me make a baby? I feel you should help me with him whenever you need to. If you're working, yeah, that's understandable, you're gonna be tired at night. But if you're not working, you can't help? You know?

After the couple broke up, Kimberly said that Gary's mother took on some of these caretaking responsibilities for him.

Lower-income and African American women have historically made large economic contributions to these families, resulting in a less sex-specialized division of labor (Jones 1985), and many men at lower educational levels have more recently experienced a decline in employment and earnings relative to women (Mincy 2006). In situations where women's income from employment was high relative to men's, bargaining theories predict that men would increase their involvement in child care (England and Folbre 2002). Parents' agreement that the father would provide child care while he was unemployed reflected an understanding that African –American and Latino men at low- educational levels often had barriers to employment, such as a history of incarceration, that prevented them from assuming a larger economic role. This exchange was not only valued by mothers who often distrusted or could not afford other child care options, but also benefited fathers who might otherwise be perceived as failing to meet traditional breadwinning responsibilities (Anderson 1999). In comparison to stable co-parenting situations, parents sometimes emphasized the exchange aspect of this early co-parenting

agreement more retrospectively. Both mothers and fathers also tended to question the equity of this exchange after parents' relationships dissolved and fathers moved out of early co-parenting.

*Later Co-parents:* Parents suggested that fathers who became later co-parents shared an understanding with the mother that they would compensate for her reduced share in parenting and their own limited involvement earlier. While later co-parenting fathers were often responding to situations where mothers faced new challenges in their lives such as losing a job, drug use, or having a new child, some of these fathers had also been constrained from being more involved when their child was younger due to economic or personal problems. Fathers in this situation understood their compensatory involvement as "helping someone when they're down" and as "making up for lost time." The compensation frame was consistent with structural explanations for the consequences of poverty (Lamont 2000) and ideas about family solidarity and familism in African American and Latino communities (Coltrane, Parke, and Adams 2000).

The stories of two men who became primary caretakers by year four illustrate how the compensation frame could be mobilized and give meaning to their involvement in quite different situations. In one case, Michelle, a mother I interviewed, was initially dissatisfied with her partners' involvement: "I tell him he needs to spend more time with his child, and do more as a father should. Be around him." At the second interview, Mali, her partner, had assumed informal custody of their child while Michelle was in a drug rehabilitation program. With a history of repeated incarceration for drug related problems himself, Mali, was happy to step into a primary caretaking position:

> I've been feeling good about myself lately, knowing that I've been able to be there for my children. It's been up like a roller coaster: up and down. But when I try to picture myself from the outside looking in, I see that things are good…He has a family now…I'm being able to play the position that I've been needing to do. I'm taking care of my responsibilities (Mali).

Other fathers, like Marcos, had been breadwinners in the first year and moved into caretaking roles after their relationship with the mother dissolved. Because parents' understandings were developed in response to particular situations, the frames they used to explain their agreements could shift as these arrangements changed. Men's identity as a father was also re-defined in relation to this new parenting role. For example, Marcos initially identified himself as good father on the basis of breadwinning, "To be a good father's to be working. You have to take care of babies." At the second interview, Marcos had temporary custody of his daughters after his divorce and had reduced his hours to spend more time with them. Paula, his ex-wife, appreciated his willingness to step in after she lost her job and her apartment and believes this caretaking experience changed his orientation to parenting: "He's playing the role of the Mommy and the Daddy. He dresses them, you know, he does everything for them. And I'm like, "hey, I'm here!"

**Preferences**

Four years after their child's birth, more than half of couples in this study had dissolved their relationships and other couples had relationships which appeared to be at risk for dissolution, making issues of custody, visitation, and child support highly salient to them. Parents' preferences for legal parenting and child support agreements at this time reflected the frames they used to understand their current or previous co-parenting agreements and their perceptions of each parent's economic and personal stability by year four. Their preferences were also influenced by the fact that many parents in this study lived together in informal unions during this time rather than being legally married. In general, I found that many parents preferred informal parenting and child support agreements, but these preferences varied with the timing and duration of fathers' involvement in co-parenting. The preferences of mothers and fathers also sometimes differed after they ended their relationships.

*Stable Co-parents* Parents involved in stable co-parenting situations over the first four years emphasized the strong, affective bond fathers had developed with their child and the importance of this relationship in the child and father's life. As Richie comments, "She knows I love her. And when you see the eyes, when you can see the way they react when you say I love, you can feel it. I can feel it when they hug me." Because stable co-parents were still living in the same household, none indicated an interest in establishing a legal custody agreement, but they typically had discussed who would have physical custody of the child if their relationships dissolved. All of the co-parenting fathers I talked to said they would prefer to share or assume primary custody of the child if their relationship with the mother ended through informal parenting agreements. These preferences were framed in reference to their commitment to maintain a large caretaking role in the context of a cooperative relationship with the mother.

> I always told [the mother], even if we end up separating and we end up moving, I take her with me. I take both of them. It's not a problem. You come visit whenever you want to… I don't think it would become a major issue, and I don't think with her it would turn out ugly. So, I don't think I would have to [go to court]…Now you hear a lot of shows where a father is stepping up and taking care of their child. Actually, a lot of 'em got custody of their kids. It used to be: "No, that's the mother's responsibility. I'm going to go live my life. You raise the kids and call me when you need something." Or, "Because I don't like you, I'm not going to deal with the kids." But now more fathers are becoming more responsible (Tyrell).

Mothers coupled with stable co-parenting fathers tended to share these preferences but felt fathers would have more difficultly providing a place for the child to live full time, particularly if the father was not working steadily (see Table 2). Although these parents continued to have comparable employment situations at the second interview, mothers were more often recipients of housing and public assistance benefits because they were recognized as the child's caretaker, and they thought they would be in a better position to provide a home for the child.

Parents' preferences for child support were more often shaped by direct experience with the legal system, largely because unmarried parents in the study who received TANF or

Medicaid were required to cooperate with child support regulations and assign their rights to child support to the state as a condition of receiving assistance. Like other mothers, Sandra said she was not interested pursuing a legal child support agreement, citing concerns about the father's economic situation and her desire to maintain cooperative parenting arrangements. This perspective has also been documented in previous studies of low-income mothers and fathers (Edin and Lein 1997; Roy 1999; Waller 2002) and of higher income parents with cooperative parenting relationships post-divorce (Arendell 1995). In comparison, unmarried parents in breadwinning situations also preferred informal parenting and child support agreements, but they assumed mothers would continue to be the child's primary caretaker if their relationships dissolved. One mother in a stable co-parenting situation explained this preference in relation to her partner's bond with the child.

> Even if something were to happen with me and his dad, I would still always have his dad in his life. I would never take that from him…I've always made it clear to Arturo that I wouldn't file for child support… I think Arturo loves him so much. I don't think he could be without him. They love each other so much. And that's beautiful.

Because cohabiting fathers were not recognized as the custodial parent, however, they could face a child support order to reimburse the state for welfare costs during this time that they cared for and supported the child.

*Early Co-parents* Like parents in stable co-parenting situations, those involved in early co-parenting initially had informal parenting and child support agreements. Early co-parenting fathers also had close relationships with their child in the first year and described a sense of loss when this relationship changed. Although some of these fathers saw their children regularly for some time after the breakup and had considered taking the child to live with them, they wanted to maintain informal visitation and custody agreements, rather than get involved with the legal system. However, at the second interview, the mothers of their children more often preferred

legal custody agreements, particularly if they had a conflicted relationship with the father or thought he was capable of taking the child (see Table 2).

Mothers also had a much stronger interest than fathers in formalizing their economic exchange by year four. Not only were informal exchanges more difficult to maintain after their relationship ended, fathers who disengaged from early co-parenting also tended to be less economically and personally stable than the mother. Mothers in this situation began to question the fairness of an exchange in which they assumed most of the financial and caretaking responsibility for the child. This could also lead them to question the fairness of the fathers' early co-parenting retrospectively. Fathers, in turn, suggested the past exchange was unfair if their previous involvement as caretaker were not factored into mother's decisions about pursuing legal child support or custody.

The story of one couple illustrates how co-parenting relationships based on an informal exchange can break down. The first time I interviewed Becky, she said, "I don't agree with [child support] 'cause he's here helping," explaining that he was caring for their child and her two children from a previous relationship while she worked full time. Between the two interviews, the couple had another child and briefly married. After a violent break up and continued conflict with the father, Becky had a different perspective on this exchange:

> He wouldn't want to try and make money and help me with bills and stuff. I was working and paying everything...I would get frustrated and argue, because I be like: "Why you don't help me doing stuff?" And he'll say, "Well, I be at home watching the kids"… He used that excuse…He got angry about child support, "Why are you trying to get money from me, you know I'm not working." I said, "It's not my problem. Figure it out. Go get you a job or do something."

Christopher, her former partner, was still struggling to find a job when I talked to him at the second interview. From his perspective, the responsibility of taking care of all four children had been overwhelming: "I was helping her with her two kids before I even had kids with her"

while she was "working all the time." Although he initially said he would take custody of their daughters if their relationship ended, he explained why he no longer wanted a legal custody or child support agreement.

> I don't have no money. I don't have no stable home for them. I don't have a stable home for myself….She took all my [stuff]…So I not giving her shit. I'm not paying no child support.

*Later Co-parents* Parents described later co-parenting fathers as initially having more distant relationships with the child either because they had ended relationships with the mother or were acting as family breadwinners in the first year. These men also lived apart from their children as nonresident fathers after their relationship with the mother ended. When fathers moved into later co-parenting, they began to spend time with their child in longer, overnight visits or took the child to live with them. Parents suggested that this new experience of caretaking gave them an opportunity to establish a closer bond with the child and develop parenting skills and confidence.

As fathers became more economically and personally stable relative to mothers, they also began to think more seriously about sharing or assuming custody of the child (see Table 2). Although parents generally preferred to handle custody and visitation privately, some mothers had already pursued child support after their relationship with the father ended. In those situations, fathers had an incentive to pursue legal visitation or custody to ensure their time with the child was officially recognized. This was an important consideration because the amount of support fathers in California are ordered to pay is based on the income of both parents and the percentage of time that the high earning parent has primary physical responsibility for the child.[3] Although cost was a barrier to filing for shared custody, Jim talks about his desire to do so in reference to his compensatory role and his considerations about child support:

[3] See http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/ for more information on how child support is calculated in California.

> I was staying with family and just flopping around, for almost two years, until I could get to where I could afford something. At least I'm here now [in his own apartment]…and now she's got three kids. I know at times that's hectic, and you would love to have a lot more physical help…I have to work a lot of extra hours just to maintain child support. So it cuts out a lot of hours [with his daughter]…To my knowledge, once we establish the visitation…then that should alter the amount [of child support].

Lauren, his child's mother, was happy that Jim was willing to take on a larger caretaking role after she had another baby. For a variety of reasons, including his limited experience in caring for their daughter earlier, Lauren was more hesitant about the idea of giving him primary physical custody of their daughter and establishing a legal agreement:

> The original agreement [was that] he was supposed to take [our daughter]. I was supposed to have [her] every other weekend…I really felt bad because I didn't want my kids split up, but then again he should have the chance to see what the responsibility is like…But then I changed my mind and then I didn't want him to have custody.

Mothers said informal agreements gave them the flexibility to make changes if the situation of the mother stabilized. Fathers sometimes shared this preference or had difficulty establishing a legal custody or visitation agreement. However, informal agreements gave both parents less protection in regard to child support and could limit men's options for assuming legal custody later if they were not recognized as caretakers (Hamer and Marchioro 2002).

**Conclusion**

Since the division between involved and uninvolved fathers began to receive scholarly attention, some men at lower educational and skill levels have become more economically marginalized (Mincy 2006), particularly in low-income, African-American and Latino communities, and mothers of young children in these communities have faced increased pressure to work. Within this context, I find that some fathers are sharing caretaking with the mother during the early years of their child's life, typically by providing child care in intact families or through informal visitation or custody arrangements in nonintact families. Interviews with low-income mothers and fathers living in California also point to three different types of co-parenting

situations which emerged in during the early years of their child's life with particular antecedents and meanings. These early patterns of involvement may be less obvious in survey and administrative data that do not follow fathers as they move out of the household, but appear to be consistent with one longitudinal study of low-income, African American parents (Coley and Chase-Lansdale 1999). Interviews with parents in this study also suggest that variations in the timing and duration of co-parenting are closely related to the contexts in which they are raising young children.

In particular, mothers and fathers indicate that the status of their relationship and the employment and personal stability of each parent are important for understanding how these three types of co-parenting emerge. Fathers tended to be involved as stable co-parents in the context of co-residential relationships in which both parents were working, a situation documented in studies of dual earner moderate income families (Coltrane 1996; Gerson 1993) and when both partners were unemployed, a situation that has received much less empirical attention. Fathers who acted as early co-parents tended to be less economically and personally stable than mothers and transitioned from this role after their relationship with the mother dissolved. In contrast, fathers became involved in later co-parenting after their personal and employment stability improved relative to mothers. Although limited research has examined nonresident fathers who increase their involvement with children, these findings generally correspond to recent evidence about some of the situations in which low-income men become custodial fathers (Hamer and Marchioro 2002).

Beyond revealing these co-parenting patterns and contexts, information from interviews with low-income parents suggests they used particular frames to understand the meaning of each co-parenting situation. Parents suggested that fathers who acted as stable co-parents made a commitment to maintain a balanced share in parenting with the mother regardless of challenges

they experienced personally or in their relationship as a couple. These men also derived a positive sense of themselves as parents and gained respect from others for weathering these challenges. Parents more often framed fathers' early co-parenting in regard to an equal exchange of resources between parents, a situation parents had difficultly maintaining after their relationship as a couple dissolved. In comparison, parents said that fathers who moved into later co-parenting had agreed to compensate for their earlier lack of involvement and mothers' reduced share in parenting, when mothers faced new challenges such as job loss, drug problems, and having additional children.

These co-parenting frames, as well as considerations about their relationships and parents' economic and personal stability, were also reflected in their preferences for the fathers' legal access to and support of the child four years after their child's birth. Because most low-income parents in this study had dissolved their relationship by the time their child was age four, issues of legal custody, visitation, and child support were highly salient to them. Couples engaged in steady co-parenting expressed a preference for informal, cooperative custody and child support agreements and expected fathers to honor this private commitment to share caretaking in the future. However, parents more often wanted to establish a legal agreement when fathers had transitioned into or out of a caretaking role. In particular, mothers coupled with early co-parenting fathers expressed a strong preference for legal child support and custody after their informal exchange relationships with less stable fathers broke down. Fathers who moved into later co-parenting in a compensatory role had an incentive to pursue legal recognition of their time with children to modify child support orders.

In recent years, significant policy efforts have been directed toward increasing legal child support orders and enforcement, and on encouraging the mothers of young children to work rather than receive welfare. "Responsible fatherhood" programs have also been designed to

encourage lower-income, non-resident fathers to maintain relationships with their children, with somewhat less attention given to encouraging fathers' access to legal visitation. The good news from a policy perspective is that some fathers who are not formally recognized as caretakers seem to be providing early child care, and others fathers appear flexible enough to move into caretaking roles when the mother faces new challenges. At the same time, most fathers in the study provide this care through informal agreements with the mother. In these situations, fathers' caretaking may be invisible from the perspective of public agencies and may not be taken into account when calculating fathers' child support obligation (Waller 2002) or their eligibility for benefits provided to custodial parents (Hamer and Marchioro 2002). When parents dissolve their relationships, they may also have difficulty maintaining the kind of cooperative co-parenting relationships that appear to facilitate father involvement (Sobolewski and King 2005) and benefit children (Amato and Galbraith 1999). Increased policy awareness and support for co-parenting is likely to be critical for maintaining father involvement later in the child's life (Pleck 1997).

This study has provided new evidence about co-parenting in low-income families from a randomly selected cohort of new parents in the Fragile Families Study in Oakland, California. As is characteristic of qualitative studies that strive for depth more than breadth, the study has limitations associated with the size of its sample and its location. As more large-scale surveys include fathers, co-parenting could be examined further in large, nationally representative samples with measures that tap fathers' caretaking in residential and nonresidential situations. Because father involvement is sensitive to the child's age and transitions in couples' relationships, it will also be important to follow families over a longer period of time to understand later patterns of involvement and in parents' legal custody and child support agreements.

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**Table 1**

***Parents' Selected Demographic and Socio-Economic Characteristics at Child's Birth (N = 62)***

| | |
|---|---|
| Mother's Age (mean) | 26 |
| Father's Age (mean) | 29 |
| Both Parents White (%) | 14 |
| Both Parents Black (%) | 40 |
| Both Parents Hispanic (%) | 28 |
| Mixed Race or Ethnic Couple (%) | 17 |
| Married at Child's Birth (%) | 31 |
| Cohabiting at Child's Birth (%) | 40 |
| Romantic, Non-Cohabiting Relationship at Child's Birth (%) | 17 |
| No Relationship at Child's Birth (%) | 11 |
| Mother has High School Education or Less (%) | 71 |
| Father has High School Education or Less (%) | 66 |
| Mother's Median Income ($1000's) | 7.5* |
| Father's Median Income ($1000's) | 12.5* |
| Father's Hourly Wage ($1) | 9 |

* Mid-points shown.

**Table 2**

***Summary of Parents' Modal Contexts, Frames, and Preferences at Year 4***

| | **No change in co-parenting from year 1** | | **Change in co-parenting from year 1** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Stable Co-parents** (17%) | **Breadwinners** *comparison group* (23%) | **Early Co-Parents** (23%) | **Later Co-parents** (17%) |
| **Contexts** | | | | |
| Relationship status | Co-residential | Co-residential | Relationship dissolved | Relationship dissolved |
| Parent employed | Both or neither | Father only | Mother only | Father only |
| Parent has personal problems | Neither | Neither | Father only | Mother only |
| **Frames** | Commitment | Specialization | Exchange | Compensation |
| **Preferences** | | | | |
| Prefer legal custody/visitation | Neither | Neither | Mother only | Father only or neither |
| Prefer legal child support | Neither | Neither | Mother only | Mother only or neither |