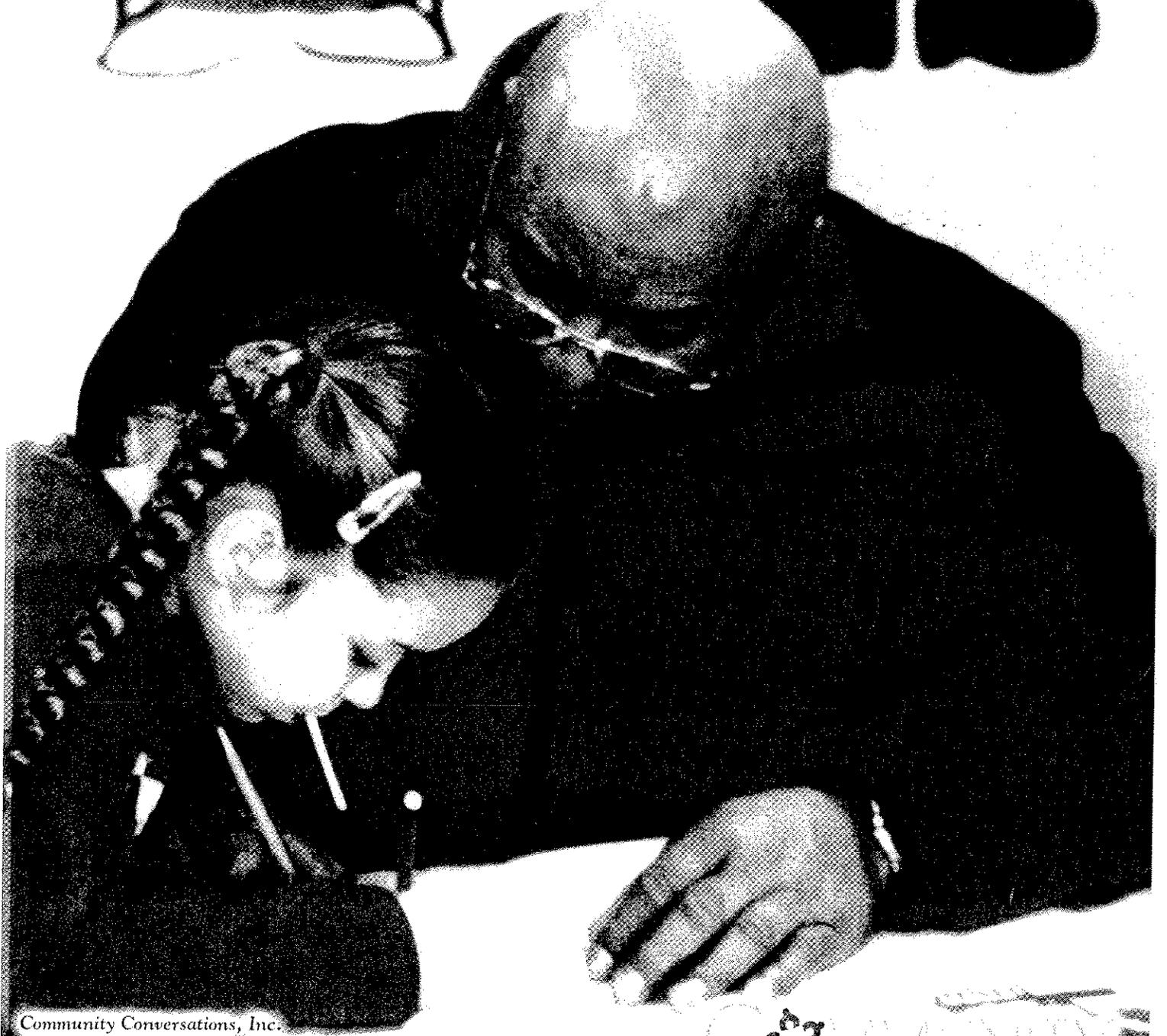


# Our Changing Families

*How do we keep dads & kids connected?*



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A community issue brief prepared by Community Conversations, Inc.

## **FAMILY FACTS**

### *United States*

24 million children (34%) live without their biological father.

Approximately 20 million children (27%) live in single parent homes.

33% of all births occur out of wedlock.

More than 3.3 million children live with an unmarried parent who "co-habits" with a partner and the numbers are increasing.

### *Kentucky*

255,378 children live with a single parent and 27% of those parents are NOT in the workforce.

There are 203,547 children under 18 years of age living in poverty – that's 21% of Kentucky's children.

124,938 single mothers live in Kentucky and 43% of them live in poverty while there are 33,496 single fathers who live in Kentucky and 24% of them live in poverty.

In 2000, there were 268,782 live births, 30% were born to mothers who were not married.

### *Daviess County*

There are 2,409 households (9.6%) with females alone parenting children under 18 years of age and 647 households (1.8%) with males alone parenting children.

In 2001, 44% of all children living in Daviess County receive free or reduced price lunches.

In 2002, 48% of obligated child support payments were collected.

In 1999, the median family income reported for single-mother families was \$15,775, for single-father families was \$28,136 and for married-couple families was \$54,830.

## How can we keep dads & kids connected?



*In this issue brief, and in our deliberations around the community, we will find many "pros" and "cons" about the different approaches that shape our view of fatherhood and our responsibilities to society's children. Many forces challenge fathers' involvement with their children. Probably no single approach will work, everywhere, every time. As a starting point for deliberation, we offer three approaches that may help strengthen the ties that bind our communities' fathers and children.*

**Approach One** says we should provide assistance to financially struggling fathers. Today's economic conditions have created a Catch-22 for many men who work to support their children. The long hours necessary to make ends meet can limit or even eliminate the time a father has to spend with a child. If he cuts back the hours he works and then cannot afford child support, he may not be allowed to see his child.

**Approach Two** suggests men should accept the responsibility of fatherhood and marriage. This traditional option holds fathers alone accountable for their actions. It encourages strong moral commitments and matrimony as the best way to anchor families in our society.

**Approach Three** maintains it takes a village to raise responsible fathers. When the community provides a supportive environment that makes it possible for fathers to meet their social, educational and economic responsibilities. Sole reliance on either marriage -- the center of approach **Two** -- and financial aid and/or jobs -- the center of approach **One** -- diminishes the responsibility of others, who, in their daily work, have the opportunity, the capacity and the duty to strengthen the connections between fathers and their children.

# Our Changing Families

*"The primary task of every civilization is to teach the young men to be fathers." - Margaret Mead*

## *Here's Daddy*

Today's grandparents grew up watching 1950's sitcoms like "Make Room for Daddy," "Ozzie and Harriett" and "Father Knows Best." Those early TV dads represented an idealized picture of American fathers of that era. They were middle class, middle-aged, middle-income, white men, who supported their families with one income – theirs – and still had lots of time to spend with the wife and kids.

That's right. One wife. One set of kids.

Those shows with their old-fashioned images of fatherhood have all but disappeared. Maybe the idealized dads were fantasies, even in the 1950s. Maybe they were a picture of what fathers aspired to be or what our society wanted fathers to aspire to be. Some people still hold on to that ideal. But few of us would say that we have it.

Today, we are as likely to see TV and real-life fathers and children separated by divorce or merged by remarriage into ever-changing father, child and stepchild combinations.

Add to that mix alternative lifestyles, in which women choose to have children without a trip to the altar or even a close encounter with a would-be father. Some same sex couples have children, through adoption, invitro-fertilization or from earlier marriages or relationships. Ever younger and younger teens experiment with sex and wind up with an unplanned child, a child the teen mother keeps, whether or not the father remains in the picture. And for some young men, a large number of offspring by many mothers has become a status symbol.

Such family configurations are far more common today than the 1950s ideal: one couple, married once, to each other, raising their children together.

## *What is the aftermath of such social change?*

More and more, we read the startling statistics of the number of children born to a single parent. Nationally, nearly 33 percent of all births are out of wedlock, with about 20 million children living in single parent homes.

We hear of divorced mothers who can't make ends meet because they are not receiving child support, and no one knows where the father lives. As many as 26 percent of absent fathers live in a different state than their children and a startling 40 percent of children in father-absent homes have not seen their father in the past year.

Other studies indicate that children who lack a father's influence are two to three times more likely to be poor, more likely to use drugs, more likely to exhibit criminal behavior, to become victims of child abuse and to have health, emotional and behavioral problems.

When paternity is not established on a child's birth certificate, the child may face serious consequences. Legal fatherhood can provide eligibility for Social Security or veteran's benefits if the father dies or becomes disabled. Only a legal father can put a child on his health insurance policy. Inheritance rights are jeopardized if the father is not named on the birth certificate of the child. Should the parents split up, paternity acknowledgment gives children added financial protection, since both parents are responsible for supporting their child.

## *Not all the news about dads is troublesome.*

Research shows a father's involvement can help children succeed in school. An article from the May 3, 2003 Louisville, Kentucky Courier Journal about a U. S. Department of Education study reported this:



The June 2000 report from the Department of Education stated that when fathers are involved with their children they "demonstrate to their children that male adults can take responsibility, help to establish appropriate conduct and provide a daily example of ... the importance of achievement and productivity."

Research from the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count Data Book for 1995 suggests that society can play a critical role in strengthening the connection of men to their children. Male behavior is influenced by the expectations about fatherhood that are transmitted every day by hospitals, preschools, courts, churches and other community institutions that deal with families. Examples include these successes:

*"Fathers with a high level of involvement in a child's school life increase the chances that a child will excel by as much as 42 percent, while a mother's involvement increases chances by 20 percent."*

1. West Virginia increased the rate of paternity establishment for unwed fathers from 15 percent to more than 60 percent in just three years. A key factor has been training maternity nurses in birthing hospitals – most of them women – to expect and encourage men to establish paternity.
2. Preschools from inner city Baltimore to suburban Marin County have increased father involvement from zero, in some cases, to the same level as mothers, just by training staff to assume that fathers, regardless of marital status, are interested in and responsible for their children.
3. Minneapolis helps non-custodial unemployed fathers stay connected to their children through a partnership between the Episcopal church and the family court which assumes men will act responsibly if they are helped to find jobs and treated as more than walking wallets.
4. According to H.A.N.D.S. (Health Access; Nurturing Development Services) with Kentucky's Cabinet for Health Services, there is a body of evidence, from 20 years of research, showing father involvement with children benefits fathers themselves. These findings indicate:
  - ❖ Men in contemporary industrial culture seek their primary emotional, personal and spiritual gratification in their family setting.
  - ❖ Emotional involvement with their children buffers the stress men experience at work.
  - ❖ Men who were invested in their children had better overall health and lower levels of psychological distress.
  - ❖ Men's involvement with their children contributed to occupational success.
  - ❖ Fathers who cared for their children's intellectual development and their adolescent's social development were more likely to advance in their occupations.
  - ❖ Fathers who participate strongly in child rearing are more likely to participate in community life at midlife.

### **Evidence validating the importance of fathers in children's lives raises questions.**

- Is there anything society can do to encourage fatherhood?
- Is it the role of society to influence such a family matter?

### **And if the answers are yes, then more questions arise.**

- Is there more to the problem than just encouraging men to acknowledge their children?
- Are fathers playing on an even playing field with mothers?
- Does our welfare system, in an effort to protect children, encourage a single-family unit?
- How can we keep our kids from losing out and encourage dads to be dads?



# Our Changing Families: How Can We Keep Dads & Kids Connected?

## What is the problem?

Each choice favors specific actions proposed by those that support that choice. We offer three; but there are many other possibilities. During our deliberation, we may hear different actions proposed.

## Approaches

### Approach 1

#### Help Financially Struggling Fathers

Too many parents are waging a war for survival. Bad economic news bombards families. Living costs are rising. Employers cut jobs or leave the community. Low-skilled jobs pay too little to support a family, and better jobs require years of expensive education.

Fathers who pay court-ordered child support may have to move to find work or cheaper housing. They may work several jobs to make ends meet. They may be in jail.

Such situations prevent fathers from meeting court-designated terms for child support and visitation. Children may lose precious time with their dads or hear them branded as dead-beats. For many families, the realities of their lives and the court-ordered terms of a father's responsibilities becomes a Catch-22.



### Approach 2

#### Take Responsibility for Fatherhood and Marriage

Traditional values – beginning with personal responsibility for one's actions – have been undermined by an "if-it-feels-good-do-it" attitude. The result has been disaster for our families and children.

Kids thrive with a strong, supportive father in their lives. Children miss this opportunity, when their fathers do not fulfill the responsibilities of being a parent.

Marriage is a time-tested anchor for families in all societies. Our social, legal, and cultural institutions must reinforce the value and benefits of marriage.

When marriage is not a workable choice, our legal system must assure that fathers live up to their obligations.

### Approach 3

#### Support Fathers' Role in the Family

The role of fathers has been under assault in our society. Welfare programs have made fathers liabilities. Sperm banks and in vitro fertilization have made them unnecessary. Sensationalized stories about abuse have made many seem monstrous. These trends contribute to social, legal, and institutional biases against fathers.

Many men have grown up without an effective father as a role model and need help learning to be good fathers. Some fathers are denied access to their children or unfairly accused of wrongdoing by mothers who are angry.

Fathers cannot be expected to embrace their responsibilities unless our families, churches, schools, hospitals, social services and courts value their roles and support their needs. Responsible fatherhood occurs when society provides effective, comprehensive, considerate social systems that support responsible parenthood.

## What should be done?

Each choice favors specific action steps proposed by those that support that choice. We offer three options, but there are many other possibilities. During our deliberation, we may hear different action steps proposed.

### Actions:

Families and schools should prepare children to succeed in school and to earn a living wage. Young people should not be passed into society unprepared, likely to become parents who struggle to support families. Cultural, social and educational institutions should encourage young people to postpone starting a family until they can financially and emotionally afford one.

Communities should adopt living wage policies to insure full time work is rewarded with wages sufficient for families to meet their basic needs for food, clothing and shelter (about \$11 per hour in most U.S. communities).

Faith communities should extend their missions to single parent families by providing day care, food, financial aid or counseling, and parenting classes.

### Actions:

Families, schools, churches, and community organizations should reinforce traditional values, teaching both boys and girls, men and women to accept the consequences for their actions and that married couples make the best parents emotionally, morally and economically.

Divorce courts should require fathers to spend time, as well as money, on their children. Children need the social support of the non-resident parent as much as they need the economic support.

Identifying the father should be a condition of receiving a birth certificate and public assistance. The child and the state would have a record of the birth father who can be required to support his child. It also would aid a child in receiving dependent benefits such as Social Security or insurance.

### Actions:

Families, schools, and the legal system must "make room for Daddy." Health care, social service, and educational agencies should revise their policies to insure they respect the role fathers play in the healthy development of their children. Local court systems should allow prompt adjustments when justifying circumstances prevent fathers from making child support payments or from maintaining weekly or monthly visitation.

The community must train men for fatherhood, just as it does mothers. It should fund organizations, such as Fathers Matter and Promise Keepers, offering information about parenting, legal issues, and financial planning. Such programs help men gain the skills, knowledge and attitudes to become effective, motivated fathers.

Mothers should encourage the father's involvement for the sake of the child.

## What would critics say?

Critics tell us why they disagree and they point out what they consider to be unacceptable costs and tradeoffs. There may be additional reasons for disagreeing that are raised during our deliberation.

## Approaches

### Approach 1

*Those who oppose this plan would say:*

Fathers should recognize their moral, economic, and spiritual responsibilities BEFORE they have children. It's the parents' responsibility to better themselves, to support their children, and to be a role model.

Parents can get help from the Cabinet for Families and Children, churches and schools. Parents can turn to their extended family to get up on their feet. When parents receive too much help, they end up letting others take care of them and their children.

One parent can only do so much. Life can be a struggle when parents' love doesn't work out and community authorities hold the father responsible. It's not fair for a father to shoulder all the financial responsibility for children. Their mothers helped bring them into the world, too.

### Approach 2

*Those who oppose this plan would say:*

Forcing fathers to be involved in their children's lives ignores the realities of family life. There are many models for successful families. Some families thrive without a father in residence or even as a recognized member.

Some fathers cannot provide the support and assistance children need. The community has a responsibility to meet the needs of its children, regardless of their parentage.

Many children grow up healthy without fathers actively involved in their lives. They even may be stronger for this perceived adversity. If it comes to a choice between children going hungry or their attending a ball game alone, it's more important to meet their basic needs.

### Approach 3

*Those who oppose this plan would say:*

Making the community responsible for developing good fathers diminishes the role and responsibility of the individual. We already pay for parenting programs and men can take advantage of them. Programs targeting men will raise taxes even higher.

Some fathers are disruptive and even dangerous to their children or the mother of their children. Public policies should not coddle people who make irresponsible choices or exhibit bad behavior.

Asking a mother to make an extraordinary effort to accommodate a nonresident father adds one more burden to an already heavy load.

Many fathers abdicate their roles. Doctors, nurses, teachers, and social workers engage in children's lives from conception through age 18. They understandably make assumptions, especially when their experience with some fathers underlies those assumptions.

## What are the tradeoffs?

*What tradeoffs must you accept, if you support these options? What outcomes would these actions produce that might cost or harm someone?*

*Would you support . . . ?*

... Relying on schools and churches to teach children responsible behavior EVEN IF the two institutions are in conflict to their approaches or the values of a family?

... A community-wide living wage policy EVEN IF it meant paying more for goods and services to offset the increased payrolls?

... Providing increased public assistance to the parent or parents who reside with a child, even if it meant increased taxes?

*Would you support . . . ?*

... Returning to the insistence that marriage is the only responsible way to parent EVEN IF a bad marriage adversely affects the child?

... Requiring fathers to spend more time with children EVEN IF they are abusive or poor role models?

... Mandated naming of both parents on a birth certificate in order to qualify for financial assistance EVEN IF it meant foregoing the right to privacy or safety for either or both parents?

... A reduced role for government?

*Would you support . . . ?*

... Federal, state and community funding for comprehensive services for parents EVEN IF your local, state and federal taxes were increased?

... Loosening the reins on fathers EVEN IF some men fail to meet their responsibilities or are abusive mentally, physically or financially?

... Providing parenting programs EVEN IF increasing government's role made the programs mandatory for all parents?

... Volunteering in family-friendly or father-mentoring programs EVEN IF it meant less personal time for you?





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