Transforming Responsible Fatherhood Practice and Policy: Bringing Scalability, Sustainability and Measurability to Father Involvement and Family Strengthening

By

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Introduction

There have been a number of challenges associated with the embracing of low-income fathers as an asset to their children, families and communities. These challenges have emanated from a number of sources. Social service practice and public policy have functioned to decouple the father from the family context as a matter of program eligibility, support for mothers and children, and child support policies that are not family strengthening. Community attitudes and community institutions have not been appreciative or overly welcoming of the roles that fathers can play in advancing overall well-being and positive outcomes for children, families and communities. This is particularly true if the father is low-income. Additionally, Responsible Fatherhood (RF) practice has been focused on fathers as the sole unit of analysis, intervention and support in ways that have siloed the efforts of the Responsible Fatherhood practitioners and created a crisis in approach that limits the scale, sustainability and the outcomes associated with the work of responsible fatherhood.

The Public Policy and Practice Formulation of the Absentee Father

Support for Mothers and Children

Since the inception of the Social Security Act of 1935 and its subsequent amendment in 1939, public policy has viewed the absence of fathers as the primary basis for making supports to mothers and children available. An extension of this practice in the 1960s took the form of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), in which eligibility rules and requirements excluded men who may in fact have been connected to the household, but nonetheless had to disappear or make themselves invisible to ensure the continued public aid eligibility of their family. In the 1990s, welfare policy as we knew it changed: Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) made provisions for time limited support, and increased the pressure on mothers receiving TANF to identify fathers for purposes of collecting child support. It also encouraged more aggressive child support collection practices, with little concern for the ability

of the father to meet the financial obligation thrust upon him. Many of these fathers were marginally connected or completely disconnected from the labor market. As a result of their marginal economic status, many of these men could not fulfill the child support obligations imposed on them. This dynamic frequently created tension between the father and the mother, while also pushing these low-income fathers underground as a function of their efforts to avoid the severe sanctions associated with their inability to pay child support (with incarceration being the harshest of the sanctions). These public policy imperatives have historically served and continue to serve to decouple low-income fathers from their families.

Community Attitudes and Social Service Practice

Despite the more than two decades of Responsible Fatherhood programming and effort by traditional RF practitioners focused on engaging and supporting low-income fathers in the lives of their children and families, we have not witnessed an appreciable and/or sustained penetration of RF practices within social service systems, nor has there been a warm embrace of these practices by the community at large. Community attitudes and social service provider practices have typically not been positively predisposed to embrace low-income fathers. Many of these low-income fathers often struggle to improve their level of economic self-sufficiency. They may have limited education, have experienced stints of incarceration, or struggle with numerous other issues precipitated by their socioeconomic circumstances. National survey research has found that public opinion is replete with negative attitudes about men and boys of color, and is particularly unforgiving and critical of low-income men and boys of color (The Opportunity Agenda, 2011). Yet, within the low-income family there is a recognition of the important role that low-income fathers can play. The Fragile Family study, which drew from a large national sample of African-American and Latino low-income families, found that over 90 percent of the mothers surveyed wanted fathers involved with the family and engaged with the children (Dispelling Myths About Unmarried Fathers, 2000). A study conducted by the Department of Health and Human Services found that African-American fathers tended to live closer to their children and spend more time with their children than white or Latino fathers (Doherty, 1996). This data belies the assumptions of the disaffected father irreparably disassociated from his family, a perception that continues to drive negative community and practitioner perceptions about low-income fathers of color. Instead, these fathers should be supported in their efforts to engage with their children and family in healthy ways. Social service practice and public policy should encourage the leveraging of existing situational assets that low-income fathers may have available (including mother support and proximity to the family) in order to grow father engagement and healthy relationship building opportunities among low-income fathers, their children and families. This is an asset investment strategy that sets an important foundation for the long-term well-being of children, families and communities.

Father Only Thinking as the Framing of Responsible Fatherhood Practice

The work of Responsible Fatherhood began in an era in which the idea of father engagement was a foreign concept, and any dialogue about the involvement and engagement of low-income fathers of color was often met with reluctance, if not hostility. The uplifting of the father's role and importance is a defining feature of Responsible Fatherhood practice, although it is often primarily focused on the father's financial capacity and economic contribution to the family. The socioeconomic difficulties that face low-income fathers of color challenged RF practitioners to their very core. Through sheer force of will and commitment, RF practitioners provided impressive assistance and support to the fathers they served. Resource constraints and difficulties in identifying supportive community collaborators often required RF practitioners to go it alone. Increasingly, sporadic funding and the proliferation of practices placed under the Responsible Fatherhood "banner" creates competition among RF practitioners themselves and further reinforces an ethic of individualism and siloing. This phenomenon has bound a practice that at one time worked to assist the field in gaining presence, attention, and in many instances recognition, but now constrains its ability to bring scale, financial stability and systematic outcome measures to its work.

Father Presence and Supporting Fathers as an Asset to their Children, Families and Communities

Ecological View of Fatherhood

There must be a growing understanding among RF practitioners, social service providers, community institutions and the public-at-large that the father's functioning does not occur in isolation, and that it is best understood as part of a family and community system (Coltrane & Parke, 1998). In order to move toward this new paradigm of practice within the Responsible Fatherhood field and in the realm of public policy and social service practice generally, stakeholders must advance a more ecologically positioned role of the father within the context of his relationship with his children, family and community. This ecological view appreciates the interactive and interdependent features of fatherhood and fathering, and allows for a more nuanced and complex articulation of the notion of fatherhood and fathering. In this constellation of complexity and interwoven causes and effects, fatherhood can find its meaning in any of the multiple levels at which fathers can function to improve family and community outcomes. Father engagement influences could include, but are not limited to: making provision for the financial support of his family, nurturing and emotionally supporting his children, engaging in an effective and supportive healthy co-parenting relationship with the mother of his children, assuming community leadership roles, interacting with community institutions such as schools for purposes of ensuring and supporting the academic and social success of his children, and advancing safety and security in the family and the community. In

order for the ecological view of fatherhood to take hold, community attitudes and institutional practices that fail to leverage fathers as a resource and/or an asset must change. Responsible Fatherhood practitioners, community stakeholders, community institutions, social service providers and the public at large must organize around an ethic that mobilizes community resources for the purpose of promoting family strengthening by engaging low-income fathers as a vital community asset, while simultaneously leveraging other important community resources on behalf of low-income fathers and their families.

Mobilizing Community and Institutional Services and Resources to Advance Father Engagement and Family Strengthening

The leveraging of community assets is an essential strategy for organizing, scaling-up and resourcing a community-wide family strengthening and father engagement approach. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) articulate the importance of mobilizing all of the assets in a community in order to inspire asset-based community development. Such development furthers the notion that successful community building involves rediscovering and mobilizing resources that are already within a community, including the skills and resources of individuals, and the relationships between associations in the community (Rans, 2005). This asset-based approach reveals the power of a meta-infrastructure, namely the power of building relationships among local associations that share a common purpose in their communities (Kretzmann et al, 2005). In fact, "associations of associations have proven to be the most powerful tool" in community building because they amplify the power of each association (McKnight, 2013).

The Stanford University Collective Impact Model incorporates the core principles of asset-based community development (Kania & Kramer, 2011). These efforts have moved away from depending on isolated independent organizations as the primary vehicle for social change, instead moving towards collaboration and a commitment of various stakeholders to a common agenda for solving a specific community-based social problem. Kania & Kramer (2011) lay out the six elements of the collective impact approach.

- Common Agenda
- Shared Measurement
- Mutually Reinforcing Activities
- Continuous Communications
- Backbone Organization
- Measuring Outcomes

In order to bring scale, sustainability and measurable outcomes to create solutions for these challenges, it is essential to execute a community model that leverages community assets and coordinates among stakeholders. Fathers, Families and Healthy Communities (www.ffhc.org) is

one such model presently in the demonstration phase. The demonstration deploys its version of the collective impact model—called "connect the dots"—which leverages the various resources that already exist in the community. As a family strengthening and father engagement intermediary, FFHC operates throughout the City of Chicago via a network of partners and collaborators connected by a set of shared practices, coordinated services and agreed upon outcomes, all managed with the FFHC database.

Conclusion

Engaging fathers as assets in their families and communities in a sustainable and scalable way requires both collective community commitment and collective community action. The collective action model offers an opportunity to measure the impact of Responsible Fatherhood at scale, and simultaneously provides for the embracing and support for fathers by community-wide stakeholders and the existing community social service infrastructure. The positive shifts in attitude and practice that embrace fathers as assets must to be reinforced by supportive public policy and public opinion. Low-income fathers desperately want to be involved in raising their children and be seen as relevant and important to their families and communities. Practitioners must commit themselves to an approach that makes the community, rather than any given individual program, responsible for advancing Responsible Fatherhood practice. This will ensure that Responsible Fatherhood practice and its impact on children and families is scalable, more sustainable and more measurable.

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