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David W. Appleby
Liberty University, dappleby@liberty.edu

Rob Palkovitz
University of Delaware

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Factors Influencing a Divorced Father's Involvement with His Children

David W. Appleby, Ph.D.

Liberty University

Rob Palkovitz, Ph.D.

University of Delaware

Abstract

One of the outcomes of divorce that has appeared consistently over the years has been a lessening of contact between divorced noncustodial fathers and their children. This review synthesizes empirical evidence to portray the formidable obstacles that men face in maintaining contact with their children after dissolution of their co-residential relationship with the child's mother. Its goal is to bring new understanding to observed behavior patterns of divorced fathers. We will briefly examine what the research tells us takes place in many fathers who have been divorced from their wives and have lost physical custody of their children.

Key Words: Divorce, Fathers, Noncustodial Fathers, Divorced Fathers, Dissolution.

Factors Influencing a Divorced Father's Involvement with His Children

Over the past twenty-five years substantial progress has been made by scholars studying the relationship between fathers and children. Literally hundreds of studies have enriched the empirical literature, while theorists have elaborated and refined the conceptual framework through which we can view the parental role (Lamb, 2004). In early studies of fathering, if fathers were studied at all, it was generally through the child's mothers' perspective of her husband (Lamb, 1979; Robinson & Barret, 1986). More recently, fathers have been studied in the context of a rapidly shifting background of family life, gender relations, declining earnings among men without college degrees, rising expectations for personal fulfillment from marriage, increases in women's participation in the paid labor force, greater social acceptance of divorce, and men's involvement as primary nonmarital caretakers (Amato, 2000; Gerson, 1993).

Fathering issues, particularly divorce and single parenthood, "dead beat dads," "androgynous" fathers, welfare reform, teenage pregnancy and nonmarital childbearing, fathers rights and responsibilities, the definition of "family," and fathers potentially unique contribution to child development, have become areas of scholarly inquiry (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). One of the more serious problems that has been observed has been the tendency of divorced noncustodial fathers to disengage from their children post divorce (Braver & Griffin, 2000; Furstenberg & Cherlin, 1991; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985: Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983; Lerman, 1993; Mott, 1993; Popenoe, 1996; Seltzer, 1991).

For most children who experience the divorce of their parents, the event will be accompanied by a marked decrease in contact with their fathers; 90% of fathers will

become the nonprimary parent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2000). For those men who depend upon court ordered visitation to provide them with the legal right to be with their children, maximum contact is defined as two weekends a month or every other weekend (Pasley & Minton, 1997). For many children, even this minimal father contact will cease altogether, but for most, decreases will occur in the pattern of everyday contact experienced before the dissolution (Braver & Griffin, 2000). Several investigators have shown that it is common for this contact to be rather limited in the short term and to drop off substantially as time progresses (Braver & Griffin, 2000; Bloom, Hodges, & Caldwell, 1983; Jacobson, 1978; Koch & Lowery, 1984). Seltzer (1991) found that just under half of divorced fathers (47%) saw their children 1-3 times per month or more, and 25% saw their children at least weekly. Pasley & Braver (2004) found that the context of families after divorce makes father involvement more difficult.

In the face of the evidence of lessening of father involvement, scholars have begun to examine how contextual factors affect involvement (Rane & McBride, 2000; Rettig & Leichtentritt, 2001; Stone & McHenry, 1998). These scholars have found that there exists great variation in frequency and types of father involvement and in the expression of fathering behaviors (Pasley, 1994; Pasley & Minton, 1997, Henley & Pasley, 2005). Much of this variation can be explained by factors that potentially influence father involvement, including fathers' personal characteristics (e.g., father's age, ethnicity, education, income), relational factors (e.g., mothers perceptions of the father's skills and abilities as a father), and other outside factors (e.g., mother's employment status, age and sex of the child) (Rane & McBride, 2000; Henley & Pasley, 2005). Yet, as Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda (2003) point out "To date, social scientists have

been remarkably unsuccessful in their efforts to understand why so many men have removed themselves or allowed themselves to be excluded from their children's lives, although the adverse effects of absent fathers on child development have been well documented" (p. 16).

The purpose of this article is not to resolve the dilemma noted by Lamb & Tamis-Leomonda, but simply to inform professionals, especially counselors, clinicians, and others who work with families, that a variety of factors that may influence a divorced father's continuing involvement with his children post-divorce. Being aware of some of these factors may enable the professional to assist fathers and children during times of transition. So, what do divorced fathers' experience?

Divorced men may experience physical and emotional stressors.

While not much is known about divorce as a risk factor of illness or death (Cheung, 1998), some of the older literature suggests that it may touch just about every area of a man's life. Various studies have found that after divorce close to half the sample of noncustodial fathers develop physical symptoms that include weight loss, ophthalmologic and dental problems, rheumatoid arthritis, headaches, and diabetes (Greif, 1979; Ambrose, Harper, & Pemberton , 1983).

The stress of divorce impacts emotional health as well. There is some evidence that suggests that men may be at greater risk for emotional disturbance, especially at the time of, and just following, the separation (Mayer, 1994). Divorced fathers are nine times more likely than married fathers to be admitted to psychiatric hospitals for the first time than are men from intact families. The rate is even higher for recently separated

men. For these men, auto accidents double in frequency six months before and six months after divorce. Divorced men are also over represented in surveys of suicides, homicides and deaths due to a variety of illnesses. Their ex-wives also feel the effects; the incidence of spousal abuse rises dramatically during and after separation and divorce. (Bloom, 1975).

All these factors influence a fathers' post-divorce relationship with his children. Fathers who are depressed, anxious, and suffering see their children less often than do fathers who are not in these emotional states (Greif, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1976; Kruk, 1991; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Based on their findings that nonresidential fathers were more depressed and anxious than residential ones, Steward, Schwebel, & Fine (1986) concluded that contact with children has a stabilizing effect on men post-divorce. Thus there is some evidence to suggest that a father's emotional stability will enhance and strengthen the relationship between father parenting role identity and father involvement (Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, & Buecher, 1995).

Divorced men are often confused as to the cause of their divorce.

It is not uncommon for men in the throes of the divorce process to be confused as to its cause. In the majority of cases, the wife is the one who initiates divorce proceedings (Ambrose et al., 1983; Brinig & Allen, 2000; Pettit & Bloom, 1984). This apparently catches many men by surprise. Kruk, working with a cross-national sample of British and Canadian fathers, reported that, when asked about the general atmosphere between the spouses at the time of the divorce (i.e. final parental separation), fathers were more likely to report an atmosphere of calm than of turbulence. Many indicated a limited

level of awareness of the impending divorce while others stated they experienced the divorce as caused by a particular event or crisis, rather than a gradual build-up of pressure. These men did not see the serious conflicts or chronic problems in their relationships culminating in the dissolution of their marriages. (Kruk, 1993; Huntington, 1986).

Divorced men may experience a radical change in life patterns.

Noncustodial parents suffer the strain of divorce, change of residence, tremendous financial stress, and loss of friends and social relationships. Shortly after a divorce men find themselves caught up in new life patterns that are characterized by compulsive "doing" that is often centered on work; both at home and in the workplace.

For most fathers, divorce presents a strain that is very much different from that which mothers experience. Divorced men face the actual or potential loss of their children. Burgess, Locke, & Thomes (1971) notes that in cases where children are present, the parent who retains the children experiences fewer crises than the one who is cut off from both the former mate and the children. In a later article, Ambert (1980) (as cited in Kruk, 1993, p.26) says that parents with custody of their children generally experience less change in their living situation, feel less lonely, insecure, and helpless in their relationships with their children, and have "an entrance into a better regulated emotional reality" than parents without custody.

Noncustodial fathers experience feelings of being deprived of their families, being rootless, and being at loose ends. Potential losses include adult sexual relationships with its loss of hopes and dreams of the future, financial resources, mutual friends and

activities, structure, order, permanence and predictability of the intact family, extended family and family ritual, and the sense of "home" (Mayer, 1994).

Divorced men may experience a loss of self-esteem and their sense of competency.

Clinical literature on men both contributes and reflects the deficit paradigm of fathering. Corneau's study (as cited in Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997) found that "a sampling of the labels and concepts used to refer to men and to fathers include: incompetent, unaware, under-developed femininity, fear of intimacy, distant, infantile, emotional children, emotionally constricted, emotionally constipated, alexithymic, toxic masculinity, hypermasculine, mascupathology, narcissistic, abusive, and oppressive" (p. 5). These terms and concepts have been applied to men and fathers.

Divorced men may also have an inner sense of being diminished or being insufficient as a person – the central issue for men as they deal with loss. Shame over the loss itself, believing that it would not have occurred if they were truly adequate or in control, is common. Often these emotional responses are also accompanied by episodes of powerful rage, silence, and guilt (Mayer, 1994).

With divorce and the loss of children come a persistent sense of loneliness and longing. These signal vulnerability and the loss of self-esteem. Men have difficulty admitting loneliness and integrating that feeling (Weiss, 1984). Some men have a pervasive and intense fear of loneliness (Jacobs, 1983). In our culture lonely men tend to be regarded as less well adjusted, less socially acceptable, and less effective in performing their expected roles. People are less tolerant of men than of women who express loneliness (Borys, Perlman, & Goldenberg, 1982).

Divorced men may feel insecure in caring for small children.

Kruk (1993) notes that it can be extremely testing for fathers to feel competent in the role of primary caretaker, especially of preschool children. Role shifts can occur abruptly and take men beyond comfort levels or established competence. Many times a divorced dad may not be aware of these needs and preferences, having formerly had a partner who operated in his behalf. His short time of visitation hardly allows for the development of the relationship, and most visitation fathers find themselves entertaining the children but not really relating to them on deeper emotional levels (Rutner, 1992).

Consistent with Kruk's findings, Furstenberg et al. (1983) pointed out that parents with greater resources are more willing and better able to sustain relations with their children. The fulfillment of this parental role, especially for males, is linked to the ability to provide material support following the marital dissolution.

Divorced men may feel that they have lost control.

There are no clearly defined scripts for the role that a divorced father is supposed to play. Wallerstein & Kelly (1980) note that the parent who moves out of the household begins a new role for which there is no dress rehearsal and no script; a visiting relationship that is strange by its very nature. Kruk (1993) says that "The fact that the 'visits' are constrained by time and location tends to create an artificial atmosphere. Feelings and needs are compressed into the narrow confines of a visit, time becomes a jarring presence, and the anxiety of parting constantly looms" (p. 27).

Many times a divorced father's sense of justice has been violated and he feels retaliatory rage. Divorced fathers are often suffering from court decisions regarding

custody, visitation, and child support. These decisions affect the amount of contact between father and child and a father's feeling closer to the child and more influential in the child's life (Arditti, 1992; Greif, 1979). Being viewed as a "visitor" can be an obstacle to father involvement. Pasley & Minton (1997) indicate that maintaining close bonds with children is difficult for divorced fathers because of the arrangements. Some men struggle to keep seeing their children, whereas other men do not, and then they struggle to feel okay about disengaging from them. Both types of struggle result in emotional pain; the greater the pain the less likely the father is to continue visitation. Men feel like they have lost control of even their level of involvement with their children. When they sense loss of control many men become extraordinarily anxious and feel justified for being angry with their ex-spouse and or the legal system that has placed them in this situation (Huntington, 1986).

Some forms of father absence may represent attempts to regain or exert retaliatory control. Unable to negotiate expectations or preferences with their former wife and children, some men take charge by refusing to cooperate or compromise with their children's custodial parent. For example, some men just drop out of their children's lives after months or even years of battles with a former spouse over custody or visitation arrangements for their children. One of these fathers characterized his absence as "a response to the condition of 'forced impotence' a response to the total denial of my rights" (Arendell, 1995, p. 146). Another man said, after unsuccessful attempts to obtain shared custody:

> I will not be a visiting uncle. I refuse to let some woman (former wife), judge, attorney, or social worker reduce me to that status. I'm a parent and parents do not visit their children. If I see my child only every other weekend, I become nothing more than a visiting uncle. I am a father in name only at this point. Until and unless I can be a father in every sense, I simply refuse to have any part of this (Arendell, 1995, pp. 146-147).

Divorced men may find that they can't trust their children after the divorce.

One of the most painful experiences that absent fathers have is rejection or resistance by their children. This is often attributed to the actions or verbal criticisms of their ex-wives. Many times these children were perceived as having "joined the other side," showing unquestioned loyalty to their mothers. Children were accused of having been brainwashed by their mother; of being hoodwinked. Some men felt that they had been accused, tried, and condemned without a chance for explanation. They felt that ex-wives shared a one-sided view of "everything" with the kids, for no apparent reason other than revenge, forcing kids to take sides (Arendell, 1995). Such alliances bring emotional distance between separated or divorced fathers and their children.

Former wives are not seen as an active partner in the raising of the children, instead they are often seen as an active conspirator against the father. The father is put in a position of not being able to trust his children. His children can come to be viewed as spies in his home. This makes their time of visitation even more difficult and stressful (Arendell, 1995).

Divorced fathers may feel the loss of their position as a father.

Divorce involves an undeniable loss of authority and status, particularly for a noncustodial father (Reissman, 1990; Seltzer, 1991). Separated or divorced men may expect to continue being a powerful player in the family, as they have been in the past. They remembered how it used to be, or at least they remember the idealization of that

role (Arendell, 1995). They attempt to maintain a viable image of themselves in the eyes of others (Goffman, 1971).

Identity theory suggests that commitment to an identity increases the likelihood that the identity is salient to the individual and reflected in their behavior (Ihinger-Tallman et al, 1995; Henley & Pasley, 2005). Commitment to this identity stems, in part, from a father's network of friends, former in-laws, parents, and other relatives. Some evidence suggests that support for continued involvement is associated with frequency of visitation, even when there is conflict between former partners (Arditti, 1992: Hetherington, Arnett, & Holler, 1988; Kruk, 1993; Tepp, 1983). Pasley & Minton (1997) report that fathers who received more encouragement from their social support network were more involved with their children; those who were lacking social support, were less involved. Fathers who see themselves as important in their fathering role seek to continue these roles; fathers who do not perceive themselves as important in the fathering role are less motivated to maintain that role (Baum, 2004; Greif, 1979).

Oftentimes the lessening of the paternal role is facilitated by a stepfather or a boyfriend of the mother who has a strong need to parent. This is particularly true of stepfathers or boyfriends who themselves have been severed from their fathering roles as a result of a previous divorce and custody arrangements (Marsiglio, 2004).

All this makes fathers feel hopeless and impotent in the struggle for parental identity. When feeling this way fathers usually react in one of two ways, give up and withdraw, or fight ferociously to maintain their parental identity. The father who hopes to do what is best for his children is put in a lose-lose situation (Williams, 1986).

Sensing his removal from a position of importance within the family to a position with little significant, meaningful input into the lives of his children by the courts, mental health professionals, and a gatekeeping former wife, the noncustodial father often feels compelled to make each visit as positive as possible. This results in his becoming what is often called a Disneyland Dad. He goes places with his kids, buys them the things they want, and invests himself in whatever way he can in this artificially contrived relationship. He refuses to be disciplinarian because the time with his children is so limited. The little time he has with his children he wants to be positive. His ex-wife perceives this as his means of undermining her authority and portraying her as the "heavy" in the lives of the children (Kruk, 1993).

Role loss can also lead to retreat. Infrequent visiting, contributing to a father's feelings of a lack of influence, control, and importance with their children, may result in less visiting and, for some, a cessation of parenting altogether. Many men, who were highly involved, affectionate parents when married, reported that they could not tolerate the pain of only intermittently seeing their children. Two years after the divorce, these fathers had diminished the frequency of their visits (Kruk, 1993).

Divorced fathers may experience a strained relationship with their ex-wife (war without end).

The ongoing strained relationship with an ex-wife was one of the most common difficulties for noncustodial fathers (Umberson & Williams, 1993). The men who were most committed to traditional beliefs about gender differences found strife was far more pronounced than cooperation (Arendell, 1995). In response, many fathers, engaged in a battle that can last for

years (Anderson-Khleif, 1982; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Wallerstein & Kelley, 1980) give up, withdraw, or fight ferociously to maintain their parental identity (Kruk, 1993).

In situations like this, a visitation father may bury his love for his children so that he can withdraw from this unequal power relationship and reduce his ex-wife's power to humiliate him. Withdrawal was favored over continued antagonism with the former wife. Anderson-Kheif (1982) concludes, "Just as women who try to collect child support often give up, fathers who cannot "collect" their visitation rights give up. They just get worn down" (p. 109). Weariness and fatigue with the stress, uncertainty, and frustration of the postdivorce situation and its accompanying interpersonal interactions undermine whatever commitment existed to remain connected to either the father's ex-wife or their children.

> I don't know, there comes a point when any man or any woman says, "I don't want to fight anymore." That's where I was. I don't want to fight anymore; I want to get rid of it. It's burning me up, it's destroying me." I had high blood pressure. I think all those things are related to stress. I said, "I have to get out of this, I can't continue this." So I let go. And what happens is you let go emotionally and you lose your kids. "Okay," I said to myself (and to the former wife), "Okay, you want everything, you wanted the kids, you wanted the house. Okay, take it, but that's it. Then we're finished. Then no more of me, for them, for you." I said, "That's how I feel. It's over, all gone." (Arendell, 1995, p. 155).

Remarriage also increases the likelihood of less contact with children. Buehler & Ryan's (1994) study of 109 divorced fathers is worth noting. They found that the relationship with the former spouse was more difficult in stepfamilies when only the father had remarried, but that father involvement was more likely to discontinue when only the mother remarried. In other words, the wife's remarriage served as a barrier to continued father involvement. Buehler and Ryan suggested, "The addition of a new husband (and possibly, a new father figure) increased the complexity of the binuclear family system in such a way that the former husbands found it either unnecessary or too

difficult to maintain pre-remarriage levels of involvement with their children (p. 146)." The same study showed that when the mother remarried, higher levels of conflict between the former spouses were associated with more father involvement (more frequent and longer visits). This suggests that a nonresident father may react to the remarriage of his ex-wife by firmly enacting his commitment to his children and to fathering behaviors (Pasley & Minton, 1997).

However, as men move on in their lives, their feelings of anger and frustration regarding their ex-wives grow irrelevant and even harmful. New wives or lovers don't enjoy hearing about their predecessors, even when the remembrances are negative. Thus, new commitments exert not only time pressures but also psychological pressures to drop out (Loewen, 1988). Men move on, often leaving their ex-partners and their children behind.

Divorced fathers may feel the loss of their children and may fear losing contact with them.

Kruk (1993) states that a father's emotional investment in their children prevails over other aspects of their lives, especially if their relationship with their children is perceived as threatened. Jacobs (1986) says that of all the potential adjustments after a divorce, the most compelling problem for divorced fathers was their pervasive sense of loss of their children. Eight of the forty-eight fathers studied by Hetherington et al. (1976) who had been highly involved, affectionate parents while married, reported that they could not tolerate the pain of only intermittently seeing their children. Two years after the divorce, these fathers had diminished the frequency of their visits with their

children in an attempt to lessen their own sense of unhappiness. They continued to experience a great sense of loneliness.

In spite of the emotional and physical distance that divorce puts between the father and his ex-wife, most fathers make a special effort to see their children, especially during the first year. Kruk (1993) found in his Canadian and British sample that 76% of post divorce fathers wanted "'a lot more contact' with their children than they actually had" (p. 25). Although most wives discouraged paternal contact (68%), those who had initiated their divorces were reported as more likely to encourage it (76%). Both those fathers were we involved in wife-initiated divorce and those whose ex-wives discouraged their involvement with their children were more likely to desire greater contact with their children.

Maternal gatekeeping was expressed in their denying father's access to their children, not having the children ready or available for visits, changing arrangements at the last minute, having confrontation or conflict with the father at the time of the access visit; criticism of the father to the children; and periodic refusal of access to the residence (Kruk, 1993). Indeed, Braver & Griffin (2000) report that about a third of the noncustodial fathers in their study claimed that they have been denied visitation privileges at least once, while a quarter of custodial parents admit such denials.

This unhappy situation is compounded by the noncustodial father's realization of how little impact he has on how his children turn out (Anderson-Khleif, 1982; Umberson & Williams, 1993; Wedermeyer, 1984). Furstenberg (1983) found that only one visitation father in five felt he had great influence over his children; custodial mothers regarded even that as an overstatement. Rather than watch their children grow up as

strangers, some fathers withdraw from the relationship altogether. Others expressed their ambivalence by making, then breaking, engagements with their children – the most common custodial complaint of mothers (Loewen, 1988).

However, even if there is a sympathetic ex-spouse, things don't always work out as planned. Furstenberg & Cherlin (1991) point out that for the first year or so fathers make special effort to see their children. However, as life goes on, as they or the children move inconvenient distances away, or as they acquire additional emotional attachments and obligations to new wives, girlfriends with stepchildren, or new babies; or as the crisis mentality of the divorce subsides and the children seem to be getting along fine, or as men grow weary of facing continual hostility from ex-wives, or for other individualistic reasons, or no apparent reason at all, a father's contact with their children tends to dwindle rapidly. Two years after a divorce two thirds of all children have virtually no contact with their fathers (Marsiglio, 2004).

Edward Kruk (1993) said it well:

> Each father's response across the continuum is unique, but there are common threads. For the majority of noncustodial fathers, the experience of divorce eventuates a process of bereavement: an upheaval of one's pattern of life, a searching for the lost child, anger and outbursts of rage, despair, and an overwhelming sense of loss, but the finality of death is absent. Fathers described confused and frightened reactions as characteristic of the first stages of divorce, in respect to their relationships with their children and with other people. Then came feelings of anger, bitterness, and frustration, usually directed towards the former spouse, and often resulting from legal negotiations regarding custody and access or unsuccessful attempts to maintain contact with one's children. Finally, pervasive feelings of sadness, a sense of loss, loneliness, hopelessness, and depression (Kruk, 1993, p. 33).

Conclusion

All of these factors, both alone and in interaction with one another, may result in a father's contact with their children dwindling rapidly in spite of the fact that most men want significantly more contact with their children than they actually had (Kruk, 1993). Unfortunately, it is a wish that most noncustodial fathers are apparently unable to see fulfilled. Indeed, there are many reasons why observed patterns of decreased father involvement or abandonment may occur following separation or divorce. As Braver & Griffin (2000, p. 263) said, "These findings suggest that low levels of father involvement in the post divorce family are more accurately, fruitfully, and optimistically viewed as the reactions of fathers to difficult situations."

Maintaining physical and emotional contact with children is sometimes challenging for fathers in intact families. Maintaining physical and emotional contact with children in disrupted families is even more difficult. It is important for both fathers and children that the "ties that bind" not be broken. Following divorce all members of the family unit, divorced or not, are transitioning from a known situation to an unknown situation. Because divorce impacts so many areas of life, (e.g. residence, jobs, chores, finances, interactional patterns) distress is common. Recognizing the kinds of experiences that divorced fathers walk through following divorce may enable them to anticipate, and therefore plan for these challenges. Pasley & Minton (1997) suggest that fathers who think more flexibly and creatively about how to father best after divorce and remarriage are more likely to experience greater ease in these transitions. Comparing their fathering opportunities to residential fathers may leave them feeling inadequate in the fathering role. Dollahite, Hawkins, & Brotherson (1997) point to what they call "Generational Ethics" and state that fathers need to feel "'called' by the next generation

to meet their needs and labor for their well being (p. 19)." Fathers may need to father because it is simply the right thing to do. Alternatively, fathers may desire continued involvement with their children after divorce because of the perceived developmental and personal benefits of involved fathering (Palkovitz, 2002).

Research indicates that fathers want to spend more time with their children and that children want more time with their fathers (Arditti, 1992: Haskins, Richey, & Wicker, 1987). While it is questionable whether we will ever be able to eliminate the destructive pattern of father absence, perhaps we can do something to lessen its pain for all parties. Awareness of these patterns is a first step.

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Author Information

David W. Appleby, Ph.D. is currently Associate Professor, Center for Counseling and Family Studies at Liberty University. His teaching, research, and writing focuses upon divorced fathers and their involvement with their children, and the role that deliverance can play in the therapeutic process. He can be contacted at dappleby@liberty.edu.

Rob Palkovitz, Ph.D. is currently Professor, Department of Individual and Family Studies at the University of Delaware. His research interests are in fathering and intergenerational relationships and development, with a particular emphasis on the relationships between patterns of father involvement and men's adult development. He is currently studying transitions within fathering, characteristics of resilient fathers in challenging circumstances, and fathers in the "launching" phases of fathering. He can be reached at robp@udel.edu