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# Conscientious Fathers: In Pursuit of Parental Inclusion

Joshua Kirven, MSW, Ph.D.

Efforts to assist children living in high-poverty areas often focus on encouraging the father to be more involved in the child's life (Mincy, Pouncy, & Zilanawala, 2016). However, despite some efforts to understand men's involvement with their children, there are currently no measures of engagement created for and validated with low-income fathers who do not reside with their children. The vast majority of validated involvement scales have been developed with samples of middle-class, residential fathers, and yet nonresident, low-income fathers face unique challenges to their involvement, necessitating measures sensitive to their situation (Edin & Nelson, 2013). Without such measures, research and intervention efforts are hampered by limited understanding and practices of the levels, sources, and consequences of these men's involvement.

It is time now that we move the needle forward. Over the past three decades, it seems the absence of fathers from the lives of their children, especially in low-income families, has been a concern in social and behavioral science departments, policy think tanks, and bipartisan government, administrative, and legislative offices. A considerable array of U.S. federal resources has been devoted to finding new cost-efficient ways to deal with concerns about absent fathers and single-parent families, but federal funds are dwindling each year.

Federal interest in father involvement has focused primarily on low-income families, as poverty is associated with a host of health and community risks for children (Pruett et al, 2017 ), as well as parental stress and strains for couples and parent-child relationships (Barnett, 2008). One consequence of individual and couple tensions that mark family instability is the vulnerability of father-child relationships, especially among young, unmarried, less educated men, and those less likely to pay child support (Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2015; Pruett et al., 2017 ).

With a significant problem among impoverished families framed as "absent fathers," federal programs first attempted to motivate low-income men, in groups led by men, to become more involved with children from whom they have already been separated. Interventions to enhance nonresident father involvement in families in which child support payments are in arrears, and the parents have new relationships have by and large not proven successful (Pruett et al., 2017). In the forecast, unless we flip the switch and new evidence emerges to the contrary, I believe that it is unreasonable to hope that father involvement interventions will be successful when men are long estranged from both mother and child.

The connection between couple conflict and co-parenting collaboration is especially strong for fathers. Fathers are less likely to be involved with their children when the relationship with the children's mother is characterized by an argumentative, competitive, non-collaborative

connection as co-parents, regardless of their marital or co-residence status (Fagan, 2013). Mothers may be more likely to restrict fathers' free access to their children (regardless of marital status) when they are upset with his fathering or treatment of her (Pruett et al., 2017). This restriction will often leave fathers deflated, ostracized, and alienated to engage in the welfare of their child. Fathers need always to be remembered as part of the solution, not part of the problem.

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Dr. Joshua Kirven is an associate professor in the Department of Social Work at Winthrop University and a part-time instructor at North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, NC. He is also a forensic mental health columnist with the American Institute for the Advancement of Forensic Studies. Kirven is a research-practitioner with more than 20 years of experience as an educator-practitioner. His research areas include fatherhood engagement and impact, neighborhood adversity and safety, prosocial youth development, and the influence of sports culture on behavioral health and academic achievement. He has an array of practice experience with solution-oriented, evidence-based interventions, and macro programming across communities and public-private sectors in the area of socially conscious capitalism. He is a Fulbright Scholar and graduate of Hampton University, the University of South Carolina, and Ohio State University.

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