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Abstract

The place of fathers in the family has long been viewed by social scientists as potentially precarious. From the time of Malinowski's writings, family theorists have recognized the comparatively weak link between biological fathers and their children—at least in contrast to the more obvious maternal bond created by pregnancy and childbearing (Malinowski 1930; Davis 1939, 1949; Goode 1960). Malinowski was among the first to observe that marriage is a cultural invention that establishes men's paternal rights and responsibilities. The near universality of marriage and its effectiveness in licensing parenthood have been taken as evidence that culture could regulate behavior no less successfully than biology.

Disciplines

Family, Life Course, and Society

10

The Disappearing American Father? Divorce and the Waning Significance of Biological Parenthood

Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., and Kathleen Mullan Harris

The place of fathers in the family has long been viewed by social scientists as potentially precarious. From the time of Malinowski's writings, family theorists have recognized the comparatively weak link between biological fathers and their children—at least in contrast to the more obvious maternal bond created by pregnancy and childbearing (Malinowski 1930; Davis 1939, 1949; Goode 1960). Malinowski was among the first to observe that marriage is a cultural invention that establishes men's parental rights and responsibilities. The near universality of marriage and its effectiveness in licensing parenthood have been taken as evidence that culture could regulate behavior no less successfully than biology.

Recent changes in marriage practices throughout the Western world have challenged this assumption. The sudden and sweeping transformation in the family during the second half of the twentieth century has caused social theorists to reconsider both the institution of marriage and men's role in the family. (Cherlin 1981, 1988; Davis 1985; Levitan, Belous, and Gallo 1988; Popenoe 1988; Spanier 1989). This chapter will neither consider the sources of this transformation—a subject that has been much addressed in previous writings—nor review in detail the abundant demographic and sociological evidence showing the declining significance of marriage (Cherlin 1988; Davis 1985; Popenoe 1988; Thornton 1989). Our main objective is to examine the impact of family changes on patterns of fathering in families where men and their children live apart.¹

The data presented here are principally drawn from the National Survey of Children, an eleven-year longitudinal study of children first interviewed in middle childhood (Furstenberg et al. 1983; Moore, Nord, and Peterson 1989). Our results take on added meaning when they are placed in the

context of other research. A number of recent studies seem to indicate that a substantial and growing fraction of nonresidential fathers spend little time with their biological offspring or offer them much in the way of material or emotional assistance. The picture that emerges is not an optimistic one. It raises serious questions about what can and should be done to strengthen the position of fathers in the family or make up for their absence. We address though do not resolve these questions in the concluding section of the chapter.

The Transformation of the American Family

The reconsideration of the role of fathers has been forced by a remarkable confluence of family changes during the past quarter-century. By now, it is well known that beginning in the mid-1960s, marriage patterns began to digress sharply from what has now become known as traditional practices. In fact, the very early age at marriage and the relatively low rates of divorce characteristic of the postwar period were discontinuous with preexisting as well as subsequent patterns of marriage behavior. The era of domestic mass production during the baby boom was in fact as anomalous as it was short-lived (Cherlin 1981; Thornton and Freedman 1983).

The declining centrality of marriage can be described as the uncoupling of a sequence of closely timed events in the process of family formation. First, the link between marriage and the onset of sexual behavior was severed; then, the link between marriage and parenthood was attenuated (Cherlin 1988; Furstenberg 1982). Then, couples began to live together outside of marriage, further postponing marriage. The incidence of non-marital childbearing soared as fewer couples felt compelled to marry merely because of pregnancy. At the same time the stability of marital unions plummeted. Marriage became a less secure arrangement for childbearing and for guaranteeing the continued presence of the biological father in the home (McLanahan and Booth 1989).

The simultaneous growth of out-of-wedlock childbearing and marital instability resulted in a sharp rise in female-headed families. Male-headed families have risen as well over the past two decades at an even slightly faster rate. Still, 87 percent of all single-parent families were headed by a mother in 1988. The proportion of children in mother-headed families stood at 21.4 percent in 1988, nearly twice the proportion in 1970 (Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families 1989).²

From the vantage point of children, the probability of growing up with both parents sharply declined during the latter third of the twentieth century. At mid-century, children probably had a higher chance of being raised by both biological parents than at any time in previous history. Rates of nonmarital childbearing were low; death rates had declined from their

still steep levels in the early part of the century; and divorce rates, except for a brief period after World War II, were fairly stable. Roughly three out of four children born in the period from 1930 to 1960 would spend their entire childhood with both of their parents (Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991; Uhlenberg 1974).

Compare that figure with the status of children born today. Just about a quarter of all children are now born out of wedlock (Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families 1989). A few of these nonmarital births actually occur in stable unions, but the great majority are to single parents or temporary unions. Add to that the substantial fraction of children born into marriages that will not survive. Bumpass and Sweet (1989) estimate that 44 percent of the children—36 percent of whites, 60 percent of African-Americans, and 43 percent of Mexican-Americans—born between 1970 and 1984 will spend some time in a single-parent family by age 16. Divorce rates have leveled off, perhaps even declined, since the mid-1970s. But nonmarital childbearing has continued to rise, more than offsetting any increase in marital stability (Furstenberg 1990). What do these high rates of marital instability imply for patterns of childbearing, and especially for fathers' involvement with their children?

Parenting Apart: A Research Review

How parents living apart coordinate childcare is a new topic in sociology of the family. The management of parenthood across households has received some attention in the growing literature on unmarried parenthood (Elster and Lamb 1986; Parke and Neville 1987; Robinson 1988; Schultz 1969). It has also come up in studies of the process of separation and divorce (Fox 1985; Lamb 1987; Wallerstein and Kelly 1980). A review of these separate two bodies of research can lead to the impression that fathers often remain involved in their children's lives and continue to play an important role in their upbringing (Children's Defense Fund 1988; Schultz 1969; Thompson 1983). However, recent evidence from several large surveys suggests a more cautious and less optimistic interpretation of the existing data on the role played by outside fathers, the actual amount of co-parenting, or even the unqualified benefits of paternal involvement for the well-being of children (Furstenberg 1989).

Data on child support provide the first piece of evidence that does not square with the impression that most unmarried and formerly married fathers continue to play an active role in the family. From the mid-1970s onward, the Census Bureau has been collecting information on child support payments to single mothers. The earliest of these surveys demonstrated that a relatively small proportion—little more than a third—of nonresidential fathers provided payments, and the level of payments was quite meager.

Never-married mothers were far less likely to receive payments. But even among formerly married mothers, the proportion receiving payments is a distinct minority (Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families 1989).

Survey Data on Relations Between Nonresidential Fathers and Their Children

The child-support data may conceal informal patterns of paternal support or they may fail to reveal recent trends of increasing support among younger cohorts of fathers. During the past decade several national surveys have provided a cross-sectional picture of the extent of paternal participation in childrearing among nonresidential fathers. The second wave of The National Survey of Children conducted in 1981 provided the first systematic data on patterns of parenting among parents living apart. Three other national surveys conducted since the 1981 survey have also provided information on the relationships between nonresidential fathers and their children (Mott 1989; Seltzer 1989, Seltzer and Bianchi 1988). We shall make no attempt to summarize the results of these studies in detail, but a few general results give the flavor of the overall findings.

All of the surveys reveal a high level of disengagement among fathers not residing with their children. In the NSC, close to half of all children living apart from their fathers had not seen them in the previous year. Most children who had had some contact with fathers saw or heard from them only sporadically. Just a sixth of the children had seen their fathers once a week or more in the past year on average. In a typical month, two-thirds of the children had no contact at all. Phoning and letter writing were also infrequent. Less than half had ever been in their father's home and only a fifth said that they had slept over at their father's house in a typical month.

More recent surveys reveal a high level of paternal disengagement, although not as steep and immediate a decline as was discovered in the NSC. Possibly, recent cohorts of fathers are more likely to retain contact with their children. Or differences in design may explain the lower level of attenuation found in recent surveys.³ Nonetheless, all studies show a sharp decline in contact over time. Many fathers who appear to initially retain contact with their children ultimately diminish their involvement in the relationship. The dynamics of this changing relationship are not well understood, but it seems that geographical mobility, remarriage, and a declining commitment to child support all figure into the attenuation of bonds between fathers and their children. The inability of many formerly married couples to negotiate a stable and viable childrearing arrangement also appears to undermine the father's continued involvement (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991).

Given the infrequent interaction between children and their fathers, residential mothers also report rather little communication between them and their former partners. Two-thirds report that they rarely or never discuss matters concerning the child with the father and three-fourths say he takes little responsibility for childrearing decisions (Furstenberg and Nord 1985). The low level of collaboration is primarily due to the father's infrequent contact. But even when he is on the scene, cooperative parenting is not the characteristic style of interaction between parents living apart. Most develop a style that might be termed "parallel parenting": They carry on their childrearing with a minimum of consultation. This style of parenting among couples who do not live together reduces the possibilities of conflict even if it occasionally places burdens on children who must live a highly segregated existence in the two separate households.

Finally, a comment about the couples who shared joint physical custody of their children. Actually, so few turned up in the second wave of the NSC that it is impossible to develop a reliable profile of their behavior. Such families may have become more prevalent in the past decade, but in the early 1980s, at least, they remained a rare breed. As for the handful of couples who did share parenting responsibilities, it appears that many experience a moderate to high amount of conflict in their dealings. As mentioned above, cooperative parenting after divorce is an elusive ideal.

It is interesting to observe the situation for the small number of children living apart from their mothers. Nonresidential mothers were more involved than fathers who lived outside the home. Still, a third of the children not living with their mothers had not seen them in the past month and 40 percent had not spent even a single night at their house. According to the custodial parent (fathers or grandparents), mothers living apart from their children were generally uninvolved with childrearing decisions and had little or no influence in day-to-day matters concerning the child. Apparently, living outside the home erodes parental participation—even when the absent parent is the mother.

Although the research to date has identified some striking trends, an incomplete picture of relations between fathers and their children in disrupted families remains. Because they have been observed at only one point in time, it is difficult to uncover much about when and why fathers disengage from their children or to discern the consequences of different patterns of paternal involvement for children.

This chapter uses both cross-sectional and longitudinal data from three successive waves of the National Survey of Children to examine the dynamics of paternal involvement over time. After a brief description of the data, we examine the changing patterns of contact between children and fathers at three points in time. We then analyze shifts in the affective bond between

children and their nonresidential fathers at two points in time as they move from early adolescence to early adulthood.

The Data

Our data are from the National Survey of Children (NSC), a panel study of a nationally representative sample of children interviewed in 1976, 1981, and 1987. The sample was developed from a household enumeration that screened families with children in the designated age range of 7 to 11 years in 1976. The survey was originally designed to be a broad assessment of the social, physical, and psychological characteristics of U.S. children and of family and neighborhood circumstances in which they grow up. In 1976, in-person interviews were obtained for 2,301 children from 1,747 households, with a completion rate of 80 percent.

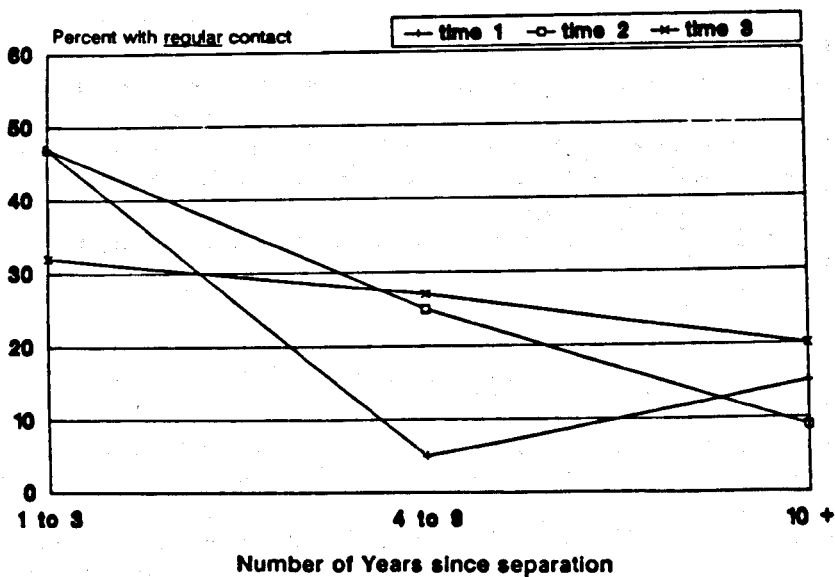
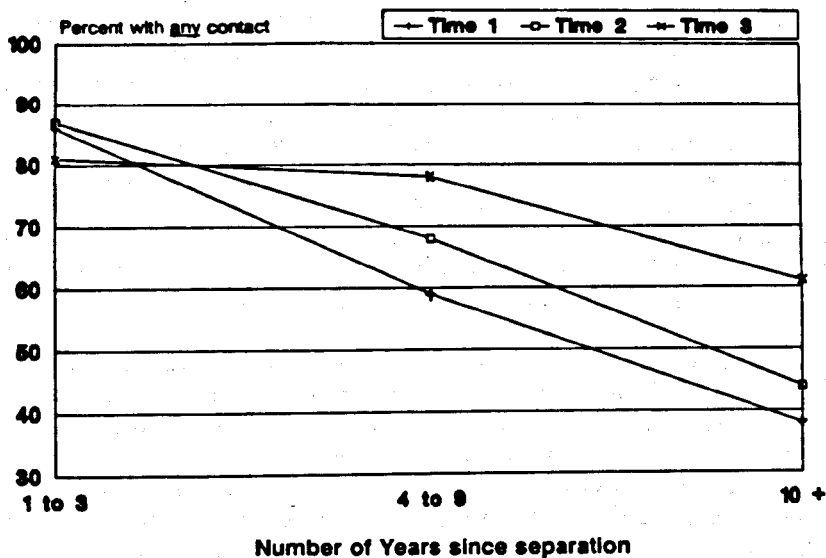
In 1981, a second wave of interviews that focused on the effects on children of marital conflict and family disruption was carried out among a subsample of the children interviewed in 1976. All children who had experienced the disruption of their families or who had been living in high-conflict families at the time of the 1976 survey were reinterviewed, as was a subsample of children who had been living in stable families at that time. Eighty-two percent of those selected for follow-up were interviewed yielding a sample of 1,423 children between the ages of 11 and 16.

The focus of the third wave of interviews in 1987 was on the social, psychological and economic well-being of sample members as they became young adults. Telephone interviews were conducted with 1,147 youth or 82.4 percent of those interviewed in previous waves. Adjustments were made in the weighting of the data to correct for differential sample attrition by age, sex, race of child, and residential location so that the sample resembles the distribution of children born between September 1964 and December 1969 and living in the United States in 1976. For further details on sample selection and data collection, see Furstenberg and Nord (1985), Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, and Zill (1983), and Moore and Peterson (1989).

Marital Disruption and Contact with Fathers

We first examine the prevailing levels of contact between children and their nonresidential biological fathers at three points in time for the sample as a whole.⁴ Figure 10.1 presents the cross-sectional data on children's contact with their nonresidential fathers by the length of time since the marriage was disrupted at the three interview points—in 1976 when children were between the ages of 7 and 11, in 1981, and in 1987 when the children were 18 to 23. The two panels of the figure show the proportion of children who have *any* contact and those with *regular* contact—at least once a week

Figure 10.1 Contact with Biological Fathers, by Length of Time Since Separation, NSC 1976, 1981, 1987



or more on average—in the 12 months preceding the survey. Obviously, one might expect to find differing levels of contact at each survey wave both because the children are getting older and because the interval since separation is lengthening on average. Because disruptions of marriages continue throughout the study, we are able to contrast patterns of contact with fathers among children whose parents divorced in middle childhood, in early and in late adolescence.

The patterns of contact at all three cross-sections appear to be roughly similar—that is, contact diminishes sharply over time. But the slope of the decline changes. It is steepest at the initial wave when children were quite young at the time of divorce and least marked when the parental separation occurred in middle childhood or later in adolescence. This suggests that a later age at separation may counteract the pattern of attenuation so evident in the initial two waves of the study.

Tables 10.1a and 10.1b explore this possibility by examining age-at-separation and duration-since-separation effects simultaneously. Although some cell sizes are too small to provide reliable estimates, it would appear that age at separation and duration since separation are both influencing the resultant pattern of contact. But age effects are much more important in determining whether children have any contact with their fathers (Table 10.1a). Duration effects are observed only among the children who were separated from their fathers before age five. (This can be seen by comparing the column and the row differences in Table 10.1a). However, when we examine regularity of contact (Table 10.1b), the results are not as clear cut. Here age-of-separation effects may be less important than duration effects. In other words, all children, regardless of when their parents separate, experience a sharp drop-off in the regularity of contact over time. However, the inconsistencies in the table suggest either that the numbers are too small to reveal regularities or that the cross-sectional data may be masking more complex changes in patterns of contact. A longitudinal examination of the data should help us to understand better the dynamics of change hinted at in the cross-sectional information presented above.

A Longitudinal Analysis of Contact

Up to this point we have assumed that contact can only diminish over time. But fathers and children may resume contact or begin to see one another more frequently. The cross-sectional snapshots provide only net effects, concealing the actual declines and increases that occur over the three time points. The next pair of tables takes advantage of the longitudinal data by observing a child's pattern of contact with his or her father from one interview to the next.⁵ We compare two sets of transitions—the first

Table 10.1a Percent of Youth Having Contact with Outside Father, by Age at Separation, Number of Years Since Separation, and Year of Interview¹

Years since separation	Time 1 (1976)			Time 2 (1981)			Time 3 (1987)		
	1-3	4-9	10+	1-3	4-9	10+	1-3	4-9	10+
Age at Separation									
1-4	-	55 (129)	38 (13)	-	62 (21)	42 (117)	-	-	52 (95)
5-9	86 (72)	83 (24)	-	-	66 (95)	67 (12)	-	-	69 (84)
10+	-	-	-	86 (44)	93 (15)	-	81 (37)	77 (48)	73 (11)

Table 10.1b Percent of Youth Having Regular Contact at Least Once a Week on Average with Outside Father, by Age at Separation, Number of Years Since Separation, and Year of Interview¹

Years since separation	Time 1 (1976)			Time 2 (1981)			Time 3 (1987)		
	1-3	4-9	10+	1-3	4-9	10+	1-3	4-9	10+
Age at separation									
1-4	-	5 (129)	15 (13)	-	19 (21)	9 (117)	-	-	21 (95)
5-9	49 (72)	4 (24)	-	-	25 (95)	-	-	-	21 (84)
10+	-	-	-	43 (44)	0 (15)	-	32 (37)	27 (48)	9 (11)

when children moved from preadolescence to adolescence (time 1 to time 2) and the second from adolescence to early adulthood (time 2 to time 3).

Looking first at the total number of children who had experienced a separation by the 1976 interview and who were reinterviewed in 1981, we observe a familiar pattern of attenuation in paternal contact (see Table 10.2a). Just under one-third of the children in contact with their fathers at time 1 lost contact by time 2; only 1 in 5 moved from no contact to some contact during the same time period. The most common pattern over time was consistency. The odds ratio of children continuing their previous pattern of contact, that is of remaining on the diagonal, was 10.3.⁶

A similar analysis of the changing pattern of contact between times 2 and 3 also reveals a pattern of consistency, though to a lesser extent (see Table 10.2a). An odds ratio of 7.0 indicates greater flux in father-child relations as children move from adolescence into early adulthood. Not only are the patterns of contact less stable in later adolescence but the direction of the change is more toward reinitiation of contact. In fact, among those who change their pattern of visitation from one time to the next, children were about as likely to gain as to lose contact during late adolescence. This has the effect of stemming the rapid decline in contact that occurs in the early years following divorce.

Regular contact exhibits a similar pattern of consistency during the two time periods—that is, stability is more characteristic in the earlier (odds ratio = 11.3) than the later period (odds ratio = 3.9—see Table 10.2b). However, the increasing amount of change reveals a different pattern of asymmetry than the pattern found for any contact. Children are far more likely to experience a sharp decline in *regular* contact during late adolescence and early adulthood than to increase their level of contact. Of course, this pattern may not be peculiar to nonresidential fathers. After all, a growing number of young adults interact less frequently with their residential parents during this time as well (Goldscheider and Lebourdais 1986).

In part, the shifting patterns of contact and regular contact described above could be artifacts of the high rates of attenuation early in children's lives. By late adolescence, so many fathers have lost contact with their children that those who remain in contact are no doubt more committed to an enduring relationship. In other words, the subgroup of fathers and children that remain in touch with one another over time becomes more selective—accounting for the declining level of attrition in contact. Also, youth with sporadic patterns of paternal contact were slightly more likely to exit from the study before time 3, further adding to the selectivity of those who maintain contact.

An additional clue to understanding the changing patterns of contact is provided by analyzing whether these patterns differ by factors such as children's sex, age, age at separation, race, their mother's educational level,

Table 10.2a Change in Patterns of Contact (at least once in previous year) from Time 1 to Time 2 and from Time 2 to Time 3

PANEL A				PANEL B			
		Time 2				Time 3	
		contact	no contact			contact	no contact
Time 1	contact	109	46	Time 2	contact	116	30
	no contact	14	61		no contact	26	47
N = 230				N = 219			

Table 10.2b Changes in Patterns of Regular Contact (at least once a week on average) from Time 1 to Time 2 and from Time 2 to Time 3

PANEL A				PANEL B			
		Time 2				Time 3	
		regular contact				regular contact	
		yes	no			yes	no
Time 1 regular contact	yes	24	21	Time 2 regular contact	yes	22	33
	no	17	168		no	24	140
N = 230				N = 219			

and whether or not she remarried during the course of the study. The results of these analyses (not shown) reveal an interesting story. In the first transition period, many of these factors showed significant differences in the pattern of continuity and in the direction of the turnover, in particular race and the education level of the mother. Blacks experienced much greater instability in their patterns of contact than whites, and children of better educated mothers (more than high school) experienced greater continuity in contact with outside fathers than children of less educated mothers.

These differences disappear in the period between time 2 and 3. That is, the same pattern observed for the entire sample is replicated within every subgroup; a decline in stability of contact and an increasing proportion

of reinitiation of some contact (relative to loss of contact). Although certain groups experience more rapid disengagement of the father following separation than other groups, over time *all groups* experience the same collective pattern in changing contact with outside fathers.

Our analysis of paternal contact has uncovered a growing amount of instability in patterns of interaction during the later stages of the study. A small number of children who had lost contact with their fathers at time 2 begin to see them on an occasional basis, but few with any regularity. Moreover, just a tenth of the children reported regular contact at both times 2 and 3—exactly the same proportion who had regular contact at both times 1 and 2. A central question is whether this modest level of contact is sufficient for many youth to sustain meaningful relationships with their fathers. In the next section of the paper, our attention turns from the quantity to the quality of relationships. The information on the changing level of affective bonds provides a clearer indication of the significance of nonresidential fathers in their children's lives.

Marital Disruption and Paternal Involvement

The quality of the father-child relationship is measured by children's reports about the level of closeness to, warmth toward, and identification with their fathers. Based on three items in the interview, we developed an affect scale that ranges from 0, when the father-child bond is very weak, to 3, when father involvement is very high. Unfortunately, no such measures were collected in the first interview, so we can only examine changing levels of affect between time 2 and 3. (See Appendix 10.1 for a description of these items and construction of the scale.) Table 10.3 provides a cross-sectional picture of relations between children and their parents, contrasting fathers in intact families with mothers and fathers in nonintact families. The top panel shows the percent of adolescents who report high levels of parental involvement for each of the three items, "closeness," "be like," and "gives affection," and the percent distribution on the 3-item affect scale for time 2. The bottom panel presents the distributions for time 3. The first column reveals the quality of the father-child bond in intact families; the remaining columns focus on nonintact families (the biological father lives outside the home). The second column shows the levels of closeness with the biological mother in nonintact families and the third column shows levels of closeness with all outside biological fathers including in the base those who had no contact with the child in the last year. The final column restricts the base of outside fathers to those with whom the adolescent has contact.

Contrasting the quality of the father-child bond in intact families with nonintact families (columns 1 and 3), we see a striking difference in the

Table 10.3 Measures of Affect in the Parent-Child Relationship by Family Structure, at Time 2 (1981) and Time 3 (1987)

	Intact Families		Non-Intact Families	
	Fathers (n=533)	Mothers (n=216)	All Fathers (n=216)	Father with contact (n=116)
Time 2				
closeness	.79	.86	.38	.53
be like	.72	.64	.32	.44
gives affection	.73	.75	.36	.53
Affect scale				
no contact			.32	
0	.07	.04	.19	.30
1	.15	.17	.15	.21
2	.25	.31	.13	.18
3	.54	.49	.21	.31
Time 3				
closeness	.71	.78	.28	.45
be like	.71	.61	.26	.42
gives affection	.71	.67	.26	.42
Affect scale				
no contact			.36	
0	.12	.13	.26	.39
1	.14	.17	.11	.18
2	.23	.23	.10	.18
3	.51	.48	.17	.25

levels of affect. The proportion of adolescents in intact families who report having a strong bond with their fathers is more than twice as high as that of the adolescents in nonintact families. At time 2, for instance, 79 percent of the adolescents in intact families say they are very close to their fathers. By contrast, 38 percent of adolescents in nonintact families report as strong a bond with their outside fathers. The weaker bond between children and their outside fathers is also suggested by the distribution of the affect scale at time 2. Almost 80 percent of the adolescents in intact families fall into the two highest levels of affect on the index compared to 34 percent of those in nonintact families.

Differences in father-child relations between intact and nonintact families are even more dramatic at time 3. Although levels of father involvement drop slightly within intact families, the decline in closeness with outside fathers is still greater. By time 3, when the children are in late adolescence and early adulthood, almost 3 times as many children from intact families as from nonintact families experience a high-quality relationship with their

father. Clearly, fathers in intact families are more involved and enjoy a closer relationship with their children than nonresidential fathers and this advantage apparently increases over time.

Focusing only on nonintact families, the child's bond to the residential mother is substantially stronger than it is to the outside biological father. By a ratio of more than 2 to 1, adolescents report stronger affective ties to their mothers than to their nonresidential fathers. Attenuation in closeness to mothers is slight compared to the decline experienced by outside fathers. The proportion of adolescents in nonintact families reporting strong affective bonds with their mothers (the two highest levels on the affect scale) drops from 80 percent to 71 percent from time 2 to 3; whereas the proportion who are close to their fathers drops from one-third to one-quarter. Thus, as adolescents from nonintact families enter early adulthood, practically three times as many report having a strong emotional bond with their mothers than with their fathers.

The affect measures in column 3 of Table 10.3 include all nonresidential fathers, including roughly a third of those at each time who have no contact at all. These fathers are omitted from the base in the fourth column. The levels of paternal affect increase due to the smaller denominator, but the data still indicate that outside fathers have much weaker bonds with their children than intact residential fathers and than nonintact residential mothers. Closeness levels with outside fathers are one-third lower at time 2 and 42 percent lower at time 3 than the levels of affect with fathers in intact families.

Among children in nonintact families who are in contact with their outside fathers, about half experience a warm and close relationship with their fathers when they are in mid-adolescence, and this proportion drops to about 43 percent as they become young adults. Thus, not only does contact decline over time, but among those who have contact, the cross-sectional perspective reveals a modest decline in closeness as well. Although the overall pattern is one of general decline in closeness over time, a sizable minority of 50 adolescents (43%) report a strong attachment with their outside fathers at time 3. Whether high levels of father involvement have a significant impact on the child's life and whether high-quality father-child relations that are sustained over time make a difference in child outcomes is currently under investigation in a separate analysis.

Paternal Involvement Where Contact Was Lost or Regained

It is especially interesting to examine the quality of the paternal relationship when contact between the outside father and adolescent was either lost or reinitiated between time 2 and time 3. Table 10.4 displays the levels of father involvement for those adolescents who lost and who regained contact

Table 10.4 Affective Measures of Paternal Involvement for Adolescents Who Lose Contact with Fathers by Time 3 and for Adolescents Who Reinitiate Contact with Fathers at Time 3

	Lose contact time 2 affect (n=31)	Reinitiate contact time 3 affect (n=22)
Affect items		
closeness	.65	.41
be like	.61	.36
gives affection	.48	.32
Affect scale		
0	.16	.55
1	.26	.14
2	.26	.00
3	.32	.32

from time 2 to time 3. Among adolescents who subsequently lost contact, we anticipated that father involvement at time 2 would be relatively weak. These children, we reasoned, would be more susceptible to losing contact when they already had previously deteriorating relations. Surprisingly, however, adolescents who lost contact over time resemble those who maintained contact in their levels of affect with their fathers. The contrasting group—adolescents who regained contact with their father—conformed more to our prior expectations. The reinitiated bond is relatively weak compared to those who had contact throughout the time period. Evidently, reinitiation of contact in the father-child relation does not lead to a high-quality relationship, at least not initially, and this hints at the possibility that fathers rather than children are responsible for the restoration of contact.

Affective Mobility

We now turn our analysis to tracking the course of father-child relations in nonintact families over time. Given a starting level of paternal involvement, what are the chances of an improvement or a deterioration in relations? In other words, how stable is the affective relationship through adolescence? To investigate the association between the levels of affect at two points in time, we use categorical data analysis to model the extent to which father-child relations change during adolescence (Fienberg 1989). When the affect

Table 10.5 Affective Mobility: Time 2 Affect Scale by Time 3 Affect Scale for Nonresidential Fathers (N = 116)

		Time 2 Affect Scale				
		0	1	2	3	total
Time 3 Affect Scale	0	19	7	10	9	45
	1	3	7	3	8	21
	2	7	4	3	7	21
	3	6	6	5	12	29
total		35	24	21	36	116

scale at time 2 is cross-classified with the affect scale at time 3, a square contingency table is obtained revealing the turnover or mobility in closeness over time and is shown in Table 10.5.⁷ If there were perfect association in the table, then affect responses would tend to cluster along the diagonal. That is, given an initial level of paternal involvement at time 2, it would remain the same at time 3. The extent to which the counts cluster on the diagonal reveals the stability in relations between fathers and children during adolescence.

Table 10.5 shows instead that there is a fair amount of movement in affective relations with outside fathers: 65 percent of the adolescents in time 2 are at a different level of closeness with their fathers at time 3. Furthermore, of those whose paternal relations change over time, 59 percent experience a decline in closeness, and 41 percent experience an improvement in relations. Therefore, for those father-child dyads that do experience changing relations, on balance, the direction of movement or change in affect over time is toward weaker rather than toward closer bonds.

Using log-linear analysis, we estimated a variety of association models to determine whether the affective mobility was due to a general change in the underlying distributions of father-child affect over time, to some systematic association in affect over time, or to random fluctuation (Hout et al. 1987). The fit of various association models to the affective mobility table in Table 10.5 is shown in Appendix 10.2. The most parsimonious

description of the changing patterns in father-child affective relations is the model specifying symmetry and independence (model #1).⁸

The symmetry in the model implies that there is no significant difference in the marginal distributions of affect between time 2 and time 3. That is, in the aggregate, affective relations with outside fathers do not change over time. Independence implies the absence of a significant association between the two affect scores over time. In other words, the level of affect in the father-child relation at time 3 is independent of the level of affect at time 2. Thus, although the underlying collective distribution of paternal involvement remains stable over time, relations with outside fathers are just as likely to improve or to deteriorate as they are to stay the same.

To explore the possibility of differences in affective mobility by subgroups of the population of nonintact families, association models were also estimated to test for gender, age, race, and family-structure interactions. The results (not shown) revealed that these factors did not determine differential affective mobility in father-child relations over time. Within each subgroup (males/females; less than 14 years of age/14+ at time 2; whites/blacks; and step-families/mother-only families) the association is symmetric and independent. It should be noted that these factors may determine differences in the *levels* of affect at a point in time, but they do not determine differences in the *pattern of change* in affect over time.

What does this mean for the course of father-child relations through adolescence and into early adulthood? The underlying dimension of closeness with outside fathers does not change significantly over time. But for an individual father-child dyad, the quality of the relationship is highly unstable and unpredictable over time. A strong affective bond at time 2 is not a guarantee that the relationship will remain strong by time 3. Conversely, adolescents who have a poor relationship with their outside father at time 2 are equally likely to improve as they are to stay the same through time. These data imply wide fluctuation in the affective bonds between adolescents and outside fathers over time.

These results contrast distinctly with a similar analysis of affective mobility within intact families (Harris and Furstenberg 1990). Father-child relations in intact families were markedly more stable over time—given a level of affect at time 2, the chances of staying at that level were much greater than moving either up or down on the affect scale. By comparison, relations with outside fathers are much less stable—perhaps because they are subject to the vicissitudes of living arrangements, marriage, and economic security that accompany family life when biological parents divorce. Possibly, too, the instability of the emotional bond could indicate a more superficial relationship between children and their nonresidential fathers that is prone to frequent emotional reassessments.

The Place of Surrogate Fathers

A shortcoming of our analysis is its exclusive focus on relations between biological fathers and their children. We have ignored the obvious fact that in the course of childhood many children acquire stepfathers or other surrogate fathers who may offer the emotional and material assistance not provided by the biological father. In a subsequent analysis we will give more attention to the role of surrogate fathers and their consequences for the well-being of children. However, we can report here that close relations with a surrogate father were about as prevalent as they were with outside biological fathers.⁹

Although adolescents were not as strongly attached to stepfathers living inside the home as they were to biological fathers in the home, levels of affect for stepfathers were very similar to those for outside fathers in early- to mid-adolescence. Within stepfamilies at time 2, about 60 percent reported feeling very close to their stepfather compared to 61 percent who reported a close relationship with their outside biological father. On the affect scale, 62 percent enjoyed a strong bond with their stepfather; 61 percent enjoyed the same degree of attachment with their biological father. As adolescents enter young adulthood, relations with stepfathers decline as do relations with biological fathers. At time 3, 38 percent report a close relationship with their stepfather compared to 43 percent with their biological fathers. Clearly some youths are able to establish strong bonds with a stepparent. The level of affective attachment with stepparents does at least indicate the possibility that many youths do form significant attachments with surrogate fathers. This may be one of many factors that accounts for the high amount of emotional instability in relations with biological fathers described previously.

Summary and Conclusion

When we look at maritally disrupted families over time, the picture that emerges confirms the impression provided by cross-sectional studies. Relationships with outside fathers are neither prevalent nor predictable. Children generally experience a declining amount of contact with their fathers. The drop-off is especially evident among children whose fathers moved out when they were quite young—many of whom lose contact with their fathers for most or all of their childhood.

The pattern of declining contact is not uniform over time. Fathers do not continue to fade out as much when children reach adolescence, and some even become more active as their children reach late adolescence and early adulthood. Patterns of contact were more stable from early childhood to adolescence than from adolescence to early adulthood when losses in

contact declined and reinitiation of contact increased. As a result, the balance of gains to losses of contact shifts dramatically, favoring a slightly higher proportion of gains as youth move from early adolescence to early adulthood.

These results suggest that we should give greater recognition to the capacity of children and fathers to resurrect their relationship later in life. Adolescents sometimes migrate from their mothers' to their fathers' households during this time. Even when they don't shift residence, they may be responsive to emotional bids from their fathers or even seek such bids. Mothers may be less able or inclined to play the role of gatekeeper. For their part, fathers may be more willing to establish ties with their children when they do not have to deal with their former spouse. Many men seem to regard childrearing as part of a bundle of marital responsibilities attached to the household where they reside. When they leave the household, they find it difficult to maintain bonds with their children at the same time that they relinquish ties to their former spouse. That mind-set may change when children no longer are so rooted to their mother's household.

Unfortunately it is difficult to establish a convincing case on the basis of our data that the mild resurgence of contact between children and their fathers is very consequential. To the contrary, reinitiation only rarely resulted in strong bonds between fathers and their offspring. And interestingly, the opposite pattern—loss of contact with fathers—is not necessarily the result of weak ties: Fathers who lost contact with their children during adolescence had just as strong ties as those who remained in contact. Such unpredictability in father-child relations when the father lives outside the home was reflected in our analysis of changing affective ties with outside fathers. Even among those children who sustain contact with their fathers, affective relations vary widely over time and paternal involvement fluctuates as children move through adolescence and into early adulthood.

Our analysis of the sources of disengagement by fathers following divorce revealed that although a few factors determined greater rapidity in disengagement, ultimately the trends we have described occur among all subgroups that we observed. That is, over time, all groups of fathers and children collectively experienced the same overall decline in contact and instability in emotional attachment.

Implications: The Effect of Fathers on Children's Welfare

This chapter has not looked at the critical question of whether or how various behavioral outcomes—schooling, early labor-market participation, teenage childbearing, crime and substance abuse, or mental health—are linked to children's relations with their fathers. We are in the midst of that analysis and will present its findings in another publication. However,

it is not difficult to anticipate some provisional findings even from the partial evidence assembled in this chapter. First of all, there are few families in which nonresidential fathers maintained frequent contact and a close relationship with their children. After all, just 10 percent of the children had regular contact with their fathers at both of the first two survey points and just 5 percent at all three. And of those who maintained contact from time 2 to time 3, just 10 percent sustained a strong affective bond compared with 34 percent in intact families. True, other fathers who had episodic and weak ties to their children strengthened their bonds during adolescence. But again, the number of such cases is small. Thus, we can anticipate that the overall impact of paternal participation on children's behavior is not likely to be very great. Of course, it is nonetheless important to look at the special subset of involved fathers to see if they provided critical assistance to their children. An earlier cross-sectional analysis using cruder measures failed to turn up evidence that children did better when their nonresidential fathers were highly involved in their upbringing. But a stronger test of this hypothesis is presently in the works.

Implications: The Changing Role of Men in the Family

This paper has emphasized the negative side of what Furstenberg (1988) previously described as the good dads-bad dads complex, a simultaneous trend in American society that gives men latitude to become highly involved caretakers or to play a relatively minor role in family life. We do not discount the abundant evidence suggesting that more residential fathers are assuming a greater level of parental responsibility. Men in the family may be gradually, sometimes willingly and sometimes reluctantly, sharing more childcare. In so doing, they may be expanding their paternal repertoire and forging much closer emotional links with their children.

But this emergent trend is more than offset, we believe, by the enormous growth in the number of nonresidential fathers. If we take seriously the evidence in this paper, active childcare among nonresidential fathers is limited. Parenting apart, whether after marriage or when marriage never occurs, introduces enormous complications in developing an effective alliance between parents, who frequently harbor considerable resentments toward one another (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991). Is it reasonable to expect these parties to exchange information, provide mutual support, and coordinate their activities on behalf of their children?

Nonresidential parents are likely to fade into a secondary role when faced with the current constraints imposed by parenting apart. Frequently, fathers adopt the alternative strategy of shifting their allegiance to a new household either by starting a new family or acquiring an existing one. This pattern of swapping families may be a rational adaptation to the

relative ease of managing children inside as opposed to outside the household. In effect, most men and women find it easier to see marriage (or its equivalent) and childrearing as a package deal than as two discrete and unrelated enterprises.

If we are correct, the role of fathers is being redefined by a changing marriage system. The responsibilities of fathers are carried from one household to the next as they migrate from one marriage to the next. Some men who become stepparents or surrogate parents in a new household often transfer their loyalties to their new family. Relations with their biological children become largely symbolic if they survive at all.¹⁰

We are arguing then that the fusion of biological and sociological fatherhood that has traditionally been accomplished by marriage may be undergoing a radical transformation as the institution of matrimony is declining. Many men are biological fathers and sociological fathers, but a growing proportion are not both at the same time. This observation has important implications for policymakers who are keen on restoring men's obligations to their biological offspring.

Implications for Public Policy

A succession of child-support enforcement bills were enacted in the 1980s, culminating in the Family Support Act passed in 1988. This latter piece of legislation was designed to require biological fathers to pay a larger share of child support. A major objective of the bill was to reinforce a father's financial obligation to his offspring. Many proponents of this legislation hope that compelling fathers to pay may also strengthen the social and emotional bonds between men and their offspring.

Although we do not disagree with the efforts to enforce child support, we are skeptical that such efforts are likely to result in stronger ties between nonresidential parents and their children. We believe that the possibilities of fostering effective paternal bonds by compelling child support are likely to be modest at best. The limitations of nonresidential fatherhood are quite real. Men are likely to develop competing obligations in other households. Residential mothers, too, sometimes have conflicting interests that may lead them to spurn or even undermine a nonresidential father's emotional claims.

We recognize that some parents manage to cooperate when they no longer reside together. Others peacefully coexist even when they cannot cooperate. Still, we believe that policies that assume a high level of collaboration between parents are doomed to produce disappointing results. The Family Support Act may well increase the level of child-support payments; however, it is not likely to reintegrate fathers back into the family.

What are our options for strengthening ties between men and their offspring? The only obvious alternative that we see is to strengthen our

faltering marriage system—a remedy that may be unappealing to some and unthinkable to others. We must admit that we have no obvious prescriptions for rejuvenating marriage. Many advocates of economic reform believe that improved economic prospects, especially among minorities, would encourage couples to enter marriage and remain wed in the face of emotional discontents. But few now argue that economic opportunities should be differentially available to men. Expanded job opportunities for women as well as men may sustain the trend of delayed marriage and high rates of conjugal instability.

Involving men in parenting could have a salutary effect on marital stability, assuming the formation of a union. All other things equal, men who actively participate in raising their children may be more reluctant to leave marriage. Furthermore, men's childrearing efforts may constitute a form of emotional capital in marriages that are badly in need of greater investment. Hence women may be less likely to experience discontents in marriage when their husbands more actively participate in childrearing (Harris and Morgan 1990). And even when marriages do not survive, more active fathers might be more likely to sustain relationships with their children after divorce. The cultural promotion of the "good dad" ideal may be one of our best defenses against the withdrawal of fathers from the family.

It should be clear that we are not very sanguine about the possibilities of reversing the general decline in the institution of marriage in modern society. But we are fairly confident that the ideal of the conjugal family system is not likely to disappear and be replaced by another family form. What we foresee is greater diversity, an expansion of our already pluralistic kinship system. Were it not the case that children experienced greatly different life chances in different family forms, the idea of pluralism might be celebrated. Perhaps, then, we ought to think about ways of ensuring that children's futures are not so tightly linked to their parents' choices of whether or not to live together.

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Appendix 10.1: Description of Affect Measures and Scale

The following three items were asked of the child in both the 1981 and 1987 interviews:

1. How close do you feel to your father:
 - 1) extremely close,
 - 2) quite close,
 - 3) fairly close, or
 - 4) not very close?

2. How much do you want to be like the kind of person he is when you're an adult:
 - 1) a lot,
 - 2) quite a bit,
 - 3) just a little, or
 - 4) not at all?

3. Does your father give you:
 - 1) all the affection you want,
 - 2) slightly less than you want,
 - 3) much less than you want, or
 - 4) don't you want affection from him?

We combined the three items above to construct an index of affect or closeness in the father-child relationship for each of the time 2 (1981) and time 3 (1987) interviews. We first standardized each item by dichotomizing the response distribution into a low and high response. On the "closeness" and "be like" items, we dichotomized the distribution as high when the respondent reported feeling extremely or quite close (1 and 2) to the parent and wanting to be like the parent a lot or quite a bit (1 and 2); and low for responses 3 and 4. On the "gives affection" item, high was indicated by the first response—when the adolescent reported that the parent gives all the affection that is wanted—and low for the remaining responses (2 through 4).

We then added the number of high responses to indicate the level of paternal involvement at the two time points. Thus, this affective dimension is measured by a scale that ranges from 0, when the child reports the affect in the relationship as low on all three items, to 3, when the child says he/she is very close to the father, wants to be like the father, and receives all the affection he/she needs from the father. The reliability

(Cronbach's alpha) of this affective scale is .78 at time 2 and .81 at time 3.

The same three items were asked of the child about the mother and an affect index was similarly computed for the mother-child relationship (with a reliability of .71).

Appendix 10.2 Likelihood-Ratio Chi-Squared Statistics for the Fit of Selected Association Models to Affective Mobility Tables for Nonresidential Fathers (N = 116)

Model	L ²	df	L ² for rejection of model: $\alpha = .05$
1. symmetry + independence	13.43	12	21.03
2. independence	11.22	9	16.92
3. symmetry	3.55	6	12.59
4. quasi-independence	3.20	5	11.07
5. quasi-symmetry	0.53	3	7.81
6. symmetry + uniform	10.19	11	19.68
7. uniform association	7.64	8	15.51

Notes

1. We have chosen not to give equal attention to fathers who remain with their children, which is treated in a separate analysis (Harris and Furstenberg 1990).

2. Children in father-headed households climbed from 1.1 percent to 2.9 percent during the same period.

3. Variations in the age of children, the interval since separation, or the measure of contact might account for some of the differences.

4. Only mother's reports of contact between children and their biological fathers were available in the first wave of the survey. Third-wave contact information was only available from the youth, while in the second wave of the survey we were able to use both mothers' and youths' reports for consistency checks. In only a small number of instances did mothers and children not agree and in all but one of these cases we favored the greater amount of contact based on the assumption that children may have been seeing their fathers without their mother's knowledge and mothers would be recalling instances of paternal contact that the children had

forgotten. One case was omitted altogether because the difference in the amount of contact reported was too great for us to reconcile.

5. The data are confined to children who were already living apart from their fathers at the prior interview.

6. This is interpreted as the chances of maintaining contact at time 2 relative to losing contact at time 2 are more than 10 times greater if there is contact at time 1 as opposed to no contact at time 1. Similarly, the chances of having no contact at time 2 are 10 times greater if there was no contact at time 1 relative to having contact at time 1.

7. This affective mobility table includes only those adolescents who have contact with their fathers at both points in time.

8. When we compare the fit of model 1 with that of the independence model (#2), the difference is an L^2 of 2.21 with 3 degrees of freedom, which is not a significant improvement in fit over the symmetry + independence model. Similarly, the comparison between model 1 and model 6, symmetry + uniform, results in an L^2 of 3.24 with 1 degree of freedom—again not a significant improvement in fit.

9. Because the affect measures regarding the stepfather were not available at all times we were not able to analyze affective mobility with stepfathers.

10. Remarriage is not the only source of reduced commitment to biological offspring. Some men who never remarry may nonetheless shift their allegiance from their biological children as they take on responsibilities for other children. For example, it has been observed, especially among African-Americans, that many men are called upon to care for their mother's or sister's children who may lack a residential father. In this chapter we have not examined the parenting patterns of unmarried fathers, a topic that will be explored in a separate analysis.

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