UNDERSTANDING TODAY'S CHANGING FAMILIES

Cynthia Osborne and Nora Ankrum

When their children are born, most unmarried parents have high expectations for the future, but they are particularly vulnerable to financial and relationship instability. Their children are disproportionately likely to experience negative health and wellbeing outcomes, in part because of low father involvement. We provide an overview of the findings in this area, drawing primarily from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study and two studies conducted by the Child and Family Research Partnership at The University of Texas at Austin. We conclude that father involvement is largely a function of parental relationship quality, and that interventions designed to improve child outcomes should focus on enhancement of co-parenting skills.

Key Points for the Family Court Community:

- Relative to their married peers, unmarried parents face distinct barriers to financial and relationship stability.
- Children of unmarried parents are more likely to experience negative outcomes for health and wellbeing, in part because of low father involvement.
- One of the most consistent predictors of father involvement is the quality of the father's relationship with the mother.
- Interventions that teach co-parenting skills may enhance relationship quality and increase positive father involvement.

Keywords: *Unmarried Parents*; *Fragile Families*; *Nonmarital Births*; *Family Instability*; *Child Wellbeing*; *Father Involvement*; *Co-Parenting*; *and Paternity Establishment*

INTRODUCTION

American families are changing rapidly. Today, more than 40% of children in the United States are born outside of marriage (Hamilton, Martin, Osterman, & Curtin, 2014). This percentage has more than doubled since 1980, at which time it was more than three times the percentage in 1960 (Child Trends DataBank, 2014). Simultaneously, the number of unmarried couples who are cohabiting has increased. From 2006 to 2010, 23% of all babies in the United States were born to unmarried parents who lived together, an increase from 14% in 2002 (Martinez, Daniels, & Chandra, 2012). Among children born to unmarried parents in 2012, almost half were born to cohabiting parents, an increase from 40% in 2002 (Martinez et al., 2012; Chandra, Martinez, Mosher, Abma, & Jones, 2005).

This article reviews research on the dynamics of unmarried families and the effects on children, drawing primarily from three studies. Conducted in 20 large U.S. cities, the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is a large, national, urban survey that followed a cohort of approximately 5,000 children born between 1998 and 2000.[1] Mothers and fathers (3,712 unmarried couples) were interviewed initially upon the birth of their children, and again one, three, five, and nine years later. The Paternity Establishment Study (PES) and Checking In With AOP Signers (CAS; AOP = Acknowledgment of Paternity) studies were conducted in 2013 by the Child and Family Research Partnership at the University of Texas at Austin. Both studies draw from representative samples of unmarried parents in Texas, a large and diverse state that provides a window into demographic trends emerging elsewhere in the United States.[2] The PES survey draws from a sample of 800 mothers and 300 fathers interviewed approximately three months after the birth of their children. The CAS survey draws from

Correspondence: cosborne@prc.utexas.edu

FAMILY COURT REVIEW, Vol. 53 No. 2, April 2015 221–232

a sample of 529 mothers and 84 fathers interviewed when their children were approximately 3 years old. The CAS study represents a distinct group of more involved fathers because it focuses exclusively on parents who signed an AOP form when their children were born. The AOP is the primary means by which unmarried fathers voluntarily establish paternity in Texas, but approximately 25% do not sign.[3]

While unmarried families often differ structurally from the traditional American family, they are similar in their aims and interests. They hope to meet shared financial goals together, to mature in their relationships, and to get married. They believe both parents will be highly involved in their children's lives (Gibson-Davis, Edin, & McLanahan, 2005). As Amato (2005) notes, young children are unlikely even to know that their cohabiting parents are unmarried.

Nonetheless, research shows that unmarried families face distinct challenges that set them apart from traditional married-parent families. Although most unmarried parents are romantically involved when their children are born, many break up soon thereafter (Carlson, McLanahan, & England, 2004). As the percentage of nonresident fathers increases, paternal involvement decreases (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008), putting children at higher risk of developing cognitive and behavioral problems than their peers in married households (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007). Signs of this instability often emerge during pregnancy. Fathers who are uninvolved during the prenatal period or who fail to attend the birth are less likely to be involved later (Cabrera, Fagan, & Farrie, 2008). Simply, unmarried parents envision a bright future that often fails to materialize (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005).

Researchers who study this issue use the term "fragile family" to describe lower-income couples who have children outside of marriage (McLanahan, Garfinkle, Mincy, Donahue, 2010). The use of the word "family" underscores the fact that the behaviors and intentions of these couples go far beyond "casual encounters" (McLanahan et al., 2010). Frequently, unmarried couples' hopes for lasting partnerships and marriage are contingent on achieving goals for relationship and financial stability that do not materialize (Edin, England, & Linnenberg, 2003). Indeed, marriage rates today are so closely linked to socioeconomic status that many researchers in this area refer to it as a "luxury good" (Linn, 2013; Cherlin, 2010). Relative to their high- and middle-income peers, low-income couples are disproportionately unable to achieve the financial and relationship stability they perceive to be prerequisites for marriage (Cherlin, 2010). As a result, children in fragile families tend to experience shifting circumstances and living arrangements (Aquilino, 1996). Parents may end the relationship or get married, transition into or out of cohabitation, find new romantic partners, or choose to live with a grandparent or other relatives. Thus, fragile families are defined both by the context in which their children are born and the shared vulnerability to destabilization that uniquely shapes the context in which their children grow up (McLanahan & Beck, 2010).

These changes in childrearing patterns carry important implications for child health and well-being. Many studies show that children of unmarried parents fare poorly across a variety of measures relative to their peers in married-parent households (Amato, 2005). Single-parent households (and some cohabiting households) are more likely to be poor (Thomas & Sawhill, 2005); children in single-mother households are more likely to exhibit behavioral problems, underperform on standardized tests, and drop out of high school (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; Aquilino, 1996). Adults who have grown up in single-parent homes are more likely to be unemployed and suffer symptoms of depression (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), therefore reproducing the poverty and inequalities experienced by many of their parents (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008). They are also more likely to have extramarital births themselves (Amato, 1991). Indeed, the Fragile Families study finds that fewer than half of unmarried fathers (42%) lived with both parents at age 15, as compared with 69% of married fathers (Carlson & McLanahan, 2009).

Though cohabiting unmarried parents fare slightly better economically, Brown (2004) finds that they too are more likely than married parents to have incomes near or below the poverty line, to have lower levels of education, and to experience lower levels of psychological well-being. As in single-parent homes, children in cohabiting homes are more likely to experience emotional and behavioral problems and less likely to be engaged in school (Brown, 2004). It is important to acknowledge that

these differences in child well-being may at least partially be explained by selection: the factors that lead couples to marry for childbearing may also lead to greater well-being for their children.

PATERNAL INVOLVEMENT AND SUPPORT

Much of the research on the factors that affect children's health and well-being focuses on financial support (formal or informal) and involvement (quantity and quality of time spent together). Findings show both are associated with favorable developmental outcomes for child well-being, from cognitive development and educational achievement to self-esteem and pro-social behavior (Carlson & Magnuson, 2011; Cabrera et al., 2007; Carlson & McLanahan, 2009).

Unmarried fathers provide financial support for their children through various means, including informal cash support, informal in-kind support (e.g., diapers, clothes, food), and formal cash support (through the child support system). Research shows that for low-income families, financial support significantly reduces material hardship (Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007). Among parents who receive formal child support, the payments account for an average of 40% of total income for poor families and 63% of total income for deeply poor families (Sorensen, 2010). Increased income can also reduce parental stress, which can improve positive parenting and parental investment in children—which in turn predict increased cognitive ability and social skills among children in low-income families (Gershoff et al., 2007). Financial support is associated with better cognitive functioning and academic achievement among children and may help attenuate adverse outcomes linked to poverty, including poor physical health, emotional well-being, and economic potential (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997).

These beneficial outcomes are also associated with positive paternal involvement, a term meant to encompass a broad range of activities shared by fathers and their children. Examples include caregiving, helping with homework, providing moral guidance and discipline, or sharing recreation and leisure time (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Palkovitz, 2002). When positively involved, fathers contribute to academic success, reduce levels of delinquency, and promote social and emotional well-being for their children (Amato, 2005; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Research has also highlighted the importance of early involvement. During the first several years of a child's life, father engagement has significant effects on cognition, language, and social and emotional development (Cabrera et al., 2007; Black, Dubowitz, & Starr, 1999). Within just the first nine months of a child's life, father–child interactions are associated with reduced cognitive delay in early infant development (Bronte-Tinkew, Carrano, Horowitz, & Kinukawa, 2008).

FATHERHOOD: PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS

Researchers use a construct that measures three distinct components of father involvement (Lamb et al., 1987; Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Lamb, & Boller, 1999). *Accessibility* (also called "availability") quantifies a father's presence in his child's life, for example, the number of hours per day or days per month spent with the child (Lamb et al., 1987; Carlson & McLanahan, 2009). *Engagement* attempts to capture the social and emotional bond between father and child across various contexts, such as caretaking and leisure time (Cabrera et al., 1999). *Responsibility* reflects a father's role in caring for a child's daily needs and overall welfare (McBride & Mills, 1993).

Data from the Texas PES study suggest that fathers participate at relatively high rates across all three domains. Three months after the birth of a child, 80% of unmarried fathers are highly accessible, meaning they have spent more than 5 days with their child in the previous month, and 7 out of 10 fathers are highly engaged, as measured by the number of days per week they read stories or sing songs to their child, hug or show physical affection, or tell their child that they love him or her (Osborne et al., 2013). Similarly, 7 out of 10 are classified as highly responsible, meaning that they help with childcare tasks—such as feeding the child, changing diapers, or putting the child to bed—at least some

of the time (Osborne et al., 2013). At the same time, levels of paternal involvement are lower among nonresident fathers. For example, the average level of engagement among resident fathers (4.8 days per week) is twice that of nonresident fathers (2.2 days per week). This finding is similar to estimates for nonresident fathers in the Fragile Families study (Carlson & McLanahan, 2009).

Despite varying levels of involvement early in their children's lives, the majority of unmarried fathers expect to be highly involved in the future. Most (71%) unmarried fathers in the Fragile Families study say they want to be involved in raising their child (Perry & Langley, 2013). In the Texas PES study, 81% of unmarried mothers say they would like the father to be completely involved in raising the child in the coming years (Osborne et al., 2013). More than 8 in 10 mothers say it is "very important" for the father to be available to help raise and regularly spend time with the child, and 7 out of 10 say it is very important that the father provide financial support and have a say in the child's life (Osborne et al., 2013).

Unmarried fathers who voluntarily establish paternity at the hospital have the highest expectations of involvement. In Texas, where hospitals provide the opportunity to sign an AOP, the PES study found that fathers who sign the form are more than twice as likely to desire complete involvement in their children's lives as compared to fathers who do not sign (Osborne et al., 2013). They are also more than four times as likely as nonsigners to live with the mother three months after the child's birth and nearly twice as likely at that time to have had contact with their child in the previous month (Osborne et al., 2013).

PERCEPTIONS OF MARRIAGE

Early in a child's life, most unmarried couples believe they will stay together, and many believe they will marry. Based on interviews with over 150 unmarried mothers, Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas (2011) report that even parents in the most tumultuous relationships often resolve to stay together following the birth of a child. Data from the Fragile Families study show that just hours after a child's birth, two-thirds of unmarried mothers rate the chances of marrying the child's father at better than 50/50 (Osborne, 2002). The numbers are higher for cohabiting parents, among whom both mothers (82%) and fathers (91%) believe that the chances for marriage are good if not certain (Edin et al., 2003). This optimism appears to persist in the first few months after birth. Among unmarried mothers in the PES study in Texas, nearly three-quarters feel there is a better than 50/50 chance of getting married in the near future, and approximately half feel that marriage is almost certain (Osborne et al., 2013).

Not only do many unmarried parents expect they will get married, but they have largely positive views of marriage as an institution (Edin & Kefalas, 2011). According to the Fragile Families study, more than 64% of unmarried mothers and 78% of unmarried fathers believe that "marriage is better for kids" (McLanahan & Beck, 2010). Unmarried mothers nonetheless see marriage as a luxury, aspiration, or even "guilty pleasure" (Edin & Kefalas, 2011, p. 136), while they see children as a "necessity" (Edin & Kefalas, 2011, p. 172). For low-income women lacking the educational background to prove their "worth" through a career, children can be "the chief source of identity and meaning" (McLanahan & Beck, 2010; Edin & Kefalas, 2011, p. 6). Edin and Nelson (2013) suggest that children may play a similar role for unmarried fathers, enhancing meaning and stability in their lives.

The rationale for delaying marriage appears to lie partly in reverence for the institution—essentially, couples believe it's not "respectable" to marry before reaching economic and social milestones (Edin et al., 2003, p. 13). Also common is the belief that to marry prematurely would increase the odds of divorce and that divorce "makes a mockery of marriage" (Edin et al., 2003, p. 14). Drawing from Fragile Families data, Gibson-Davis et al. (2005) find that the majority of unmarried parents cite financial instability (74.5%) and relationship quality (57.4%) as obstacles to marriage, and more than 42% cite fear of divorce (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Nonetheless, they maintain high hopes for overcoming these challenges.

DASHED DREAMS

Despite their intentions, most unmarried couples do not marry or even stay together. Fragile Families data show that within 5 years, cohabitation drops from 50 to 35% (Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study Fact Sheet, n.d.). In that time, 60% of nonmarital unions dissolve overall, and among couples who were not living together at the birth, only 20% remain romantically involved (McLanahan & Beck, 2010). Results from the PES and CAS studies show significant relationship erosion as well, even among AOP-signing fathers, the most optimistic group early on. Though three-quarters of AOP-signing couples are cohabiting initially, the proportion slips to just 59% by the time the child reaches the age of 3. The percentage of those who are dating drops from 12% to just 4%, and only a little more than a quarter marry. Meanwhile, the percentage of AOP-signing couples in no relationship grows from less than 10% to over one-third (Osborne et al., 2013).

The dissolution in parents' romantic relationships affects paternal involvement, particularly when a father transitions from living with the family to living apart. Relative to cohabiting fathers, nonresident fathers in the PES study are 11 times more likely to have low levels of engagement with their infants. Similarly, while 9 in 10 residential fathers are highly responsible, the same is true for less than half of nonresident fathers (Osborne et al., 2013).

Several indicators serve as early warning signs that unmarried parents' expectations of father involvement and relationship stability may go unrealized. They include: level of education and employment (Ellwood & Jencks, 2004; McLanahan, 2009; McLanahan, 2011), multipartner fertility (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2007), risky behavior (such as substance abuse), incarceration of a parent, and domestic abuse (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007; Waller & Swisher, 2006; Osborne et al., 2013). Also important are the father's involvement during the pregnancy (Cabrera et al., 2008; Shannon, Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, & Lamb, 2009; Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007), whether or not he lives with the mother during the prenatal period (Osborne et al., 2013; McLanahan & Beck, 2010), and voluntary paternity establishment (Osborne & Dillon, 2014). Among the most consistent indicators of father involvement is the quality of the parental relationship (Coley & Chase-Lansdale, 1999; Gavin et al., 2002; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007; Waller & Emory, 2014). Together, these factors provide important information about a family's future, and crucially, they do so at a point in time when early interventions may be possible. The following section briefly outlines prior research on each of these indicators.

CLASS AND MARITAL STATUS

There is a close link between class and marital status. Data from the Pew Research Center show that only 35% of lower-income Americans are married, compared to more than half of middle- (55%) and upper-income (57%) Americans (Parker, 2012). Couples of higher socioeconomic status positively select into marriage (Ellwood & Jencks, 2004), in part because they find it easier to meet the milestones that elude those with fewer resources (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005). Fragile Families data show that unmarried parents are younger than their married peers, earn less, are less likely to have a high school degree or to have education beyond high school, and are disproportionately African American and Latino (McLanahan, 2009; McLanahan, 2011).

McLanahan (2004) has found that distinct marriage trajectories based on socioeconomic status lead to widening economic disparities among children—those from lower income families increasingly lose resources while those from upper income families increasingly gain. Nonetheless, for low-income couples, the choice to delay marriage often makes rational economic sense (Cherlin, 2010). Unlike their college-educated peers, low-income couples are not poised to take advantage of the material and legal benefits of marriage, such as protections tied to asset ownership; moreover, they may even lose social welfare benefits for which they must be single to qualify (Cherlin, 2010). More to the point, women of higher socioeconomic status tend to delay childbearing in addition to marriage while low-income women do not (Ellwood & Jencks, 2004). Indeed, poor women are three times more

likely than affluent women to have a child outside of marriage (Edin & Kefalas, 2011), in part because it makes little sense to wait for a "capstone experience" that is far from certain (Gibson-Davis et al., 2005).

PRENATAL INVOLVEMENT AND PATERNITY ESTABLISHMENT

A father's prenatal behavior is an important clue to his future involvement (Cabrera et al., 2008). The behaviors that have been studied include: discussing the pregnancy with the mother, giving her money or buying things for the baby, providing transportation, doing chores, attending prenatal appointments or classes, listening to the baby's heartbeat, and feeling the baby move (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007; Cabrera et al., 2008; Cabrera, Shannon, Mitchell, & West, 2009; Shannon et al., 2009). According to the Fragile Families study, these types of actions during pregnancy can place the father on a "trajectory" that foretells his level of commitment to the mother, his likelihood of employment, and his involvement over the first few years of the child's life (Cabrera et al., 2008). Data from the three-city Welfare, Children, and Families survey show a positive association between future involvement and a composite score of early involvement that includes prenatal support, birth attendance, and postnatal hospital visitation (Coley & Hernandez, 2006). Findings from the Early Head Start national evaluation's sample of 2,160 families show that fathers with higher levels of prenatal involvement were more likely to attend the birth and maintain accessibility over a child's first 5 years (Shannon et al., 2009).

Although an early show of support may simply be indicative of overall paternal commitment, Coley and Hernandez (2006) suggest that a father's early behavior may also strengthen his commitment and enhance co-parenting in the long run by improving his efficacy and level of comfort with parenting in general. Indeed, researchers have long noted that fathers can bond with their partners and the unborn child during the prenatal period (May, 1980).

In the Texas PES study, Osborne and Dillon (2014) find that a father's absence at the 20-week ultrasound is the single strongest predictor that he will fail to attend the birth and establish paternity. The specificity of this finding and its visibility to health care workers provides a potential point of intervention during which expectant mothers can be given important information about paternity establishment and child support and potentially be connected with relevant support services.

By and large, data from the Fragile Families study show that among unmarried parents who live together, father involvement is extremely high during this pivotal time, with nearly all fathers providing financial support (96.5%) and general help (97.7%) during pregnancy (McLanahan & Beck, 2010). Among parents living apart but romantically involved, the proportions dip, with 84% providing financial support and 75% providing general help. Among those who aren't romantically involved, less than a third provide financial help (27.9%) and under a quarter provide any other kind of help (21.9%; McLanahan & Beck, 2010). Reiterating the salience of prenatal father involvement as a harbinger of future outcomes, research shows that nonresident fathers who are involved during the pregnancy (e.g., providing money, helping with transportation and chores, and attending the birth) are more likely to move in with the family in the future than to remain nonresidential (Cabrera et al., 2008). Even among residential fathers, the degree of prenatal involvement matters. Data drawn from 6,816 fathers surveyed as part of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort show that higher levels of commitment early on translate into higher quantity and quality of involvement as the child grows older (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2007).

The PES finds low levels of prenatal involvement among many unmarried Texas fathers: 37% "rarely" or "never" attend prenatal appointments, and almost one-quarter do not attend the birth (Osborne & Dillon, 2014). The birth is a critical juncture: it is the point at which unmarried fathers typically establish paternity, and it serves as an opportunity for a father to engage with his new role as parent. Fathers who are involved in the earliest stages of a child's life are more likely to have assumed the fatherhood identity, and may be more likely to act in ways that are consistent with this identity later on (Marsiglio, 2004).

Relative to fathers who don't establish paternity shortly after a baby's birth, those who do are likely to have higher involvement during the first several years of a child's life (Argys & Peters, 2001). Similarly, fathers who sign the form in the hospital, rather than elsewhere, have been found to have higher levels of contact with their children one year later (Mincy, Garfinkel, & Nepomnyaschy, 2005). PES data show that absence at the birth is the most prominent reason fathers fail to sign the AOP form at the hospital. Of the 28% of fathers who do not establish paternity, more than two-thirds are not present at the hospital when the opportunity is offered (Osborne & Dillon, 2014). Differences between signing and nonsigning fathers emerge quickly after a child's birth. Just three months into a child's life, most signing fathers remain highly engaged (86%) and responsible (80%); however, on both measures, the proportions are only 30% for those who have not signed (Osborne et al., 2013).

DOMESTIC ABUSE AND RISKY BEHAVIOR

The presence of abuse is associated with diminished father involvement before and after the birth (Osborne et al., 2013), as well as a lower likelihood that parents will stay together (Waller & Swisher, 2006). Other antisocial characteristics, such as a history of substance abuse or incarceration, also decrease the likelihood of father involvement (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007). Importantly, paternal involvement may not be beneficial if the father has a history of harmful behavior (Jaffee, Moffitt, Caspi, & Taylor, 2003). In fact, voluntary paternity establishment is inadvisable in cases of domestic violence, given the potential for a violent father to gain legal and unmonitored access to the child.[4] Three months after the birth of their children, 1 in 10 unmarried mothers in Texas report that they have been physically hurt in an argument with the child's father since becoming pregnant, and nearly 1 in 5 feels that the child's father has put her or the child at risk of physical or emotional harm (Osborne et al., 2013). Fragile Families data show that more than 11% of mothers report experiencing physical abuse perpetrated by the father (Waller & Swisher, 2006). In an abusive situation, a mother's attempt to establish paternity or open a child support case can trigger violent behavior or give the abuser personal information that could put the mother and child in danger (Family ties, 2000). In these cases, the preferred arena for paternity establishment is not the hospital but the court system, which can more safely establish legal parameters for child support and visitation arrangements.

MULTIPARTNER FERTILITY

Multipartner fertility (MPF) also has strong links to father involvement, relationship quality, and co-parenting (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2007; Carlson et al., 2004). The added complexity arising from having children in multiple households can strain parents' ability to cooperate effectively (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007; Carlson & Furstenberg, 2007). Research shows that the effects of MPF may be most pronounced when the father has a child from a previous partnership. When a father divides his time and money among households, mothers report that it undermines the quality of their partnership; moreover, both sets of children lose resources (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2007). Among unmarried parents in Texas, the PES study finds that 30% of mothers and 34% of fathers have a child from a previous relationship. Compared to parents who do not have children from prior relationships, Osborne et al. (2013) find that those who do are significantly more likely to break up at least once during the pregnancy. Fathers with children from prior partners also appear to have lower expectations of involvement from the outset: three months after the birth, mothers report that only 62% of MPF fathers desire complete involvement in raising their new child, compared to 80% of non-MPF fathers (Osborne et al., 2013).

COHABITATION

A father's involvement over the first few years of a child's life is highly associated with his residential status near the time of his child's birth. The Texas PES study finds that residential,

unmarried fathers are nearly twice as likely as nonresident fathers to establish paternity in the hospital (Osborne et al., 2013). Among unmarried parents, those who live together also have the best prospects of remaining in stable unions; 5 years after the birth of a child, 60% of cohabiting couples are still together, if not married, as compared with 20% of those who are romantically involved but living apart (McLanahan & Beck, 2010).

Although nonresident fathers have fewer opportunities for contact with their children, it is important to note that the type and quality of interaction also matter (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Children of warm, supportive nonresident fathers reap the benefits of greater involvement, demonstrating a lower propensity to act out in school, show signs of depression, and exhibit antisocial or aggressive behavior (King & Sobolewski, 2006). In short, although residential status largely determines a father's opportunities for involvement, the father–child relationship ultimately depends on what the father is able and willing to do with those opportunities. Research shows that a father's choices and actions in this regard are largely determined by the quality of his relationship with the mother.

THE CO-PARENTING RELATIONSHIP

The quality of the parents' relationship is one of the most consistent predictors of father involvement (McLanahan & Beck, 2010; Gavin et al., 2002). Fagan and Palkovitz (2007) find that father engagement with infants is higher among parents who are friends or romantically involved than among those in acquaintance relationships. Waller and Emory (2014) find that among unmarried parents, those without close relationships at the birth have the weakest relationship quality and paternal involvement five years later. Other research shows that paternity establishment at birth is more likely if the parents' prenatal relationship is stable, and the father has provided emotional support (Mincy et al., 2005; Osborne & Dillon, 2014). Coley and Chase-Lansdale (1999) find that a strong parental relationship not only increases the likelihood of paternal involvement, but also can mediate the effects of the father's residential and marital status. Carlson and McLanahan (2006) find that the positive association between relationship quality at birth and parenting a year later is not affected by marital status. In view of these findings, interventions designed to improve relationship skills among parents may improve outcomes for children regardless of parents' relationship status. Moreover, focusing on parental relationship quality at the prenatal stage may be opportune.

Poor parental relationships can set fathers on a trajectory of diminished involvement in their children's lives. In the first and third years of the Fragile Families study, more than a third of fathers reported that the quality of their relationships had declined since the birth of their child (Cabrera et al., 2008). The quality of the relationship predicts its stability, which in turn has implications for child well-being—as parents grow apart and begin other relationships, families grow increasingly complex, and parental conflict can become a significant barrier to contact for nonresident fathers (McLanahan & Beck, 2010).

Carlson and McLanahan (2001) find that mothers' reports of greater father supportiveness are associated with improved parent–child involvement, regardless of the status of the parental relationship. Moreover, the quality of involvement is higher when the parents' relationship is positive (Marsiglio et al., 2000). Indeed, conflicted parental relationships can lead to negative outcomes for child well-being when contact with a nonresident father is high (Amato & Rezac, 1994). This is also the case for married parents: parental conflict among married couples is associated with a paternal parenting style that is less engaged and more "hostile" (Coley & Hernandez, 2006). Together, these findings suggest that efforts to ensure positive child outcomes by improving father involvement should focus on improving the parents' approach to conflict management and collaboration, regardless of their relationship status.

Sobolewski and King (2005, p. 1198) have found that "cooperative co-parenting"—noncohabiting parents' ability to "actively engage with one another in order to share childrearing responsibilities"—is relatively uncommon but predicts an increase in responsive fathering, higher frequency of contact with children, and improvements in the father–child relationship. As egalitarian fatherhood norms

spread, rates of cooperative co-parenting may be improving. In their meta-analysis examining 63 studies on nonresident fathers and child well-being, Amato and Gilbreth (1999, p. 569) find an increase over time in the positive effects of father–child contact. They write that this "upward shift in effect sizes" reflects a change in the nature of father–child contact—one in which nonresident fathers act in a more "authoritative fashion." In underscoring the malleability of father behavior, these findings suggest that interventions designed to improve co-parenting skills might be effective. This notion is supported by research linking parenting interventions to improvements in outcomes for children and adolescents (Brooks-Gunn & Markman, 2005; Wolchik et al., 2002; Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009).

CONCLUSION

Families in the United States have changed dramatically in recent decades and continue to be dynamic. The increase in children born to unmarried parents is perhaps the most significant change given that this family type serves as a proxy for subsequent instability and poorer child outcomes. Many unmarried, fragile families have strong intentions of remaining together and jointly raising their children; unfortunately, economic and social barriers often dash these high hopes, leaving mothers to raise their children with little help from fathers. This review points to the importance of the mother–father relationship in keeping the father involved in his child's life, regardless of the status of his relationship with the mother. Quality father involvement and healthy co-parenting can reduce the negative influences on children in the new family forms.

NOTES

1. For more on the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, see http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu.

2. In 2013, the Texas population was 44% White, 38.4% Hispanic, and 12.4% Black (U.S. Census, 2014). Population projections for the U.S. as a whole increasingly mirror this demographic composition. By 2050, the U.S. is expected to be 47% White, 29% Hispanic, and 13% Black (Passel & Cohn, 2008).

3. For more on the Paternity Establishment Study (PES) and Checking In With AOP Signers (CAS) study, see http://childandfamilyresearch.org.

4. Similarly, in-hospital paternity establishment is inadvisable when paternity is in doubt. Henry (2006) finds that 3 in 10 lab-accredited DNA tests reject the target father (Henry, 2006). According to PES study data, 21.5% of unmarried Texas mothers report that the assumed father doubts his paternity (Osborne & Dillon, 2014).

REFERENCES

Amato, P. R. (1991). Parental absence during childhood and depression in later life. *The Sociological Quarterly*, *32*, 543–556.

Amato, P. R. (2005). The impact of family formation change on the cognitive, social, and emotional well-being of the next generation. *The Future of Children*, *15*(2), 75–96.

Amato, P. R., & Gilbreth, J. G. (1999). Nonresident fathers and children's well-being: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *61*, 557–573.

Amato, P., & Rezac, S. (1994, June). Contact with nonresident parents, interparental conflict, and children's behavior. *Journal of Family Issues*, *15*, 191–207.

Aquilino, W. S. (1996). The life course of children born to unmarried mothers: Childhood living arrangements and young adult outcomes. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *58*, 293–310.

Argys, L. M., & Peters, E. H. (2001, May). Interactions between unmarried fathers and their children: The role of paternity establishment and child-support policies. *The American Economic Review, Papers and Proceedings of the Hundred Thirteenth Annual Meeting of the American Economic Association*, *91*, 125–129.

Black, M. M., Dubowitz, H., & Starr, R. H., Jr. (1999). African American fathers in low income, urban families: development, behavior, and home environment of their three-year-old children. *Child Development*, *70*, 967–978.

Bronte-Tinkew, J., Carrano, J., Horowitz, A., & Kinukawa, A. (2008). Involvement among resident fathers and links to infant cognitive outcomes. *Journal of Family Issue*, *29*, 1211–1244.

Bronte-Tinkew, J., Ryan, S., Carrano, J., & Moore, K. A. (2007). Resident fathers' pregnancy intentions, prenatal behaviors, and links to involvement with infants. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *69*, 977–990.

Brooks-Gunn, J., & Duncan, G. J. (1997). The effects of poverty on children. *The Future of Children*, *7*, 55–71.

Brooks-Gunn, J., & Markman, L. (2005). The contribution of parenting to ethnic and racial gaps in school readiness. *The Future of Children*, *15*, 139–168.

Brown, S. L. (2004). Family structure and child well-being: The significance of parental cohabitation. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *66*, 351–367.

Cabrera, N. J., Fagan, J., & Farrie, D. (2008). Explaining the long reach of fathers' prenatal involvement on later paternal engagement. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *70*, 1094–1107.

Cabrera, N. J., Shannon, J. D., Mitchell, S. J., & West, J. (2009). Mexican American mothers and fathers' prenatal attitudes and father prenatal involvement: Links to mother–infant interaction and father engagement. *Sex Roles*, *60*, 510–526.

Cabrera, N. J., Shannon, J. D., & Tamis-LeMonda, C. (2007). Fathers' influence on their children's cognitive and emotional development: From toddlers to pre-k. *Applied Development Science*, *11*, 208–213.

Cabrera, N. J., Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., Lamb, M. E., & Boller, K. (1999). *Measuring father involvement in the early head start evaluation: A multidimensional conceptualization*. Paper presented at the National Conference on Health Statistics, Washington, DC.

Carlson, M. J., & Furstenberg, F. (2007). *The consequences of multi-partnered fertility for parental involvement and relationships*. Princeton, NJ: Bendheim-Thomas Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University.

Carlson, M. J., & Magnuson, K. A. (2011). Low-income fathers' influence on children. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *635*, 95–116.

Carlson, M. J., & McLanahan, S. S. (2001). *Father involvement in fragile families*. Working Paper #01-16-FF. Princeton, NJ: Bendheim-Thomas Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University.

Carlson, M. J., & McLanahan, S. S. (2006). Strengthening unmarried families: Could enhancing couple relationships also improve parenting? *Social Service Review*, *80*, 297–321.

Carlson, M. J., & McLanahan, S. S. (2009, May 11). *Fathers in fragile families*. Working Paper WP09-14-FF. Princeton, NJ: Bendheim-Thomas Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University.

Carlson, M. J., McLanahan, S. S., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2008). Coparenting and nonresident fathers' involvement with young children after a nonmarital birth. *Demography*, *45*, 461–488.

Carlson, M., McLanahan, S., & England, P. (2004). Union formation in fragile families. *Demography*, *41*, 237–261.

Chandra, A., Martinez, G. M., Mosher, W. D., Abma, J. C., & Jones, J. (2005). Fertility, family planning, and reproductive health of U.S. women: data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth. *Vital and Health Statistics*, *23*(25), 1–160.

Cherlin, A. J. (2010). *The marriage-go-round: The state of marriage and the family in America today*. New York: Random House.

Child Trends DataBank. (2014, July). *Births to unmarried women: Indicators on children and youth*. Retrieved from http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=births-to-unmarried-women

Coley, R. L., & Chase-Lansdale, P. L. (1999). Stability and change in paternal involvement among urban African American fathers. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *13*, 416–435.

Coley, R. L., & Hernandez, D. C. (2006). Predictors of paternal involvement for resident and nonresident low-income fathers. *Developmental Psychology*, *42*, 1041–1056.

Cowan, P. A., Cowan, C. P., Pruett, M. K., Pruett, K., & Wong, J. J. (2009). Promoting fathers' engagement with children: Preventive interventions for low-income families. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *71*, 663–679.

Edin, K., England, P., & Linnenberg, K. (2003, September). *Love and distrust among unmarried parents*. Washington, DC: National Poverty Center Annual Poverty Conference.

Edin, K., & Kefalas, M. (2011). *Promises I can keep: Why poor women put motherhood before marriage*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Edin, K., & Nelson, T. (2013). *Doing the best I can: Fatherhood in the inner city*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Ellwood, D. T., & Jencks, C. (2004). The spread of single-parent families in the United States since 1960. *Working Paper #RWP04-008*. Cambridge, MA: Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.

Fagan, J., & Palkovitz, R. (2007). Unmarried, nonresident fathers' involvement with their infants: A risk and resilience perspective. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *21*, 479–489.

Family ties: Improving paternity establishment practices and procedures for low-income mothers, fathers and children. (2000). National Women's Law Center. Center on Fathers, Families and Public Policy. Retrieved from http://www.cffpp.org/publications/commonground.pdf

Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study Fact Sheet (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/documents/FragileFamiliesandChildWellbeingStudyFactSheet.pdf

Gavin, L. E., Black, M. M., Minor, S., Abel, Y., Papas, M. A., & Bentley, M. E. (2002). Young, disadvantaged fathers' involvement with their infants: An ecological perspective. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *31*, 266–276.

Gershoff, E. T., Aber, J. L., Raver, C. C., & Lennon, M. C. (2007). Income is not enough: Incorporating material hardship into models of income associations with parenting and child development. *Child Development*, *78*, 70–95.

Gibson-Davis, C. M., Edin, K., & McLanahan, S. (2005). High hopes but even higher expectations: The retreat from marriage among low-income couples. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *67*, 1301–1312.

Hamilton, B. E., Martin, J. A., Osterman, M., & Curtin, S. C. (2014, May 29). Births: preliminary data for 2013. *National Vital Statistics Report*, *63*(2), 1–19.

Henry, R. K. (2006). Innocent third party: Victims of paternity fraud. *Family Law Quarterly*, *40*, 51–79.

Jaffee, S. R., Moffitt, T. E., Caspi, A., & Taylor, A. (2003). Life with (or without) father: the benefits of living with two biological parents depend on the father's antisocial behavior. *Child Development*, *74*, 109–126.

King, V., & Sobolewski, J. M. (2006). Nonresident fathers' contributions to adolescent well-being. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *68*, 537–557.

Lamb, M. E., Pleck, J. H., Charnov, E. L., & Levine, J. A. (1987). A biosocial perspective on paternal behavior and involvement. In J. B. Lancaster, J. Altmann, L. R. Sherrod, & A. Rossi (Eds.), *Parenting across the life span: Biosocial dimensions* (pp. 111–142). Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Linn, A. (2013, October 26). The class divide: marriage as a "luxury good." CNBC. Retrieved from http://www.cnbc.com/id/101141374

Marsiglio, W. (2004). Studying fathering trajectories: In-depth interviewing and sensitizing concepts. In R. D. Day & M. E. Lamb (Eds.), *Conceptualizing and measuring father involvement* (pp. 61–82). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Marsiglio, W., Amato, P., Day, R. D., & Lamb, M. E. (2000). Scholarship on fatherhood in the 1990s and beyond. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, *62*, 1173–1191.

Martinez, G., Daniels, K., & Chandra, A. (2012). Fertility of men and women aged 15–44 years in the United States: National Survey of Family Growth, 2006–2010. *National Health Statistics Reports*, *51*, 1–28.

May, K. A. (1980). A typology of detachment/involvement styles adopted during pregnancy by first-time expectant fathers. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, *2*, 445–453.

McBride, B. A., & Mills, G. (1993). A comparison of mother and father involvement with their preschool age children. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *8*, 457–477.

McLanahan, S. (2004). Diverging destinies: How children are faring under the second demographic transition. *Demography*, *41*, 607–627.

McLanahan, S. (2009). Fragile families and the reproduction of poverty. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *621*, 111–131.

McLanahan, S. (2011). Family instability and complexity after a nonmarital birth: Outcomes for children in fragile families. In M. J. Carlson & P. England (Eds.), *Social class and changing families in an unequal America* (pp. 108–133). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

McLanahan, S., & Beck, A. N. (2010). Parental relationships in fragile families. *The Future of Children*, *20*(2), 17–37.

McLanahan, S., Garfinkel, I., Mincy, R. B., & Donahue, E. (2010). Introducing the issue. *The Future of Children*, *20*(2), 3–16.

McLanahan, S., & Percheski, C. (2008). Family structure and the reproduction of inequalities. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *34*, 257–276.

McLanahan, S., & Sandefur, G. D. (1994). *Growing up with a single parent: What hurts, what helps*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Mincy, R., Garfinkel, I., & Nepomnyaschy, L. (2005). In-hospital paternity establishment and father involvement in fragile families. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, *67*, 611–626.

Osborne, C. (2002). *Diversity among unmarried parents: human capital, attitudes, and relationship quality*. Working Paper #02-01-FF. Princeton, NJ: Bendheim-Thomas Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University.

Osborne, C., & Dillon, D. (2014). *Why fathers fail to establish paternity: Conditioning the in-hospital paternity establishment decision on fathers' presence at birth*. Working Paper W14002. Princeton, NJ: Bendheim-Thomas Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, Princeton University.

Osborne, C., Dillon, D., Gaertner, F., Breeden, R., Brill, R., Wright, B., et al. (2013). *In-hospital acknowledgment of paternity (AOP): A portrait of father involvement and support in the first three years after a nonmarital birth*. Austin, TX: Child and Family Research Partnership, LBJ School of Public Affairs, University of Texas.

Osborne, C., Dillon, D., Gaertner, F, Breeden, R., Brill, R., Wright, B., & Zimmerman, E. (2013). In-hospital acknowledgement of paternity (AOP): A portrait of father involvement and support in the first three years after a nonmarital birth. *Child and Family Research Partnership*.

Palkovitz, R. (2002). Involved fathering and child development: Advancing our understanding of good fathering. In C. S. Tamis-LeMonda & N. J. Cabrera (Eds.), *Handbook of father involvement* (pp. 33–64). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Parker, K. (2012, August). *Yes, the rich are different*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/08/27/yes-the-rich-are-different

Passel, J. S., & Cohn, D. (2008). U.S, population projections: 2005–2050. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from http://pewhispanic.org/fiIes/reports/85.pdf.

Perry, A. R., & Langley, C. (2013, June). Even with the best of intentions: Paternal involvement and the theory of planned behavior. *Family Process*, *52*, 179–192.

Shannon, J. D., Cabrera, N. J., Tamis-LeMonda, C., & Lamb, M. E. (2009). Who stays and who leaves? Father accessibility across children's first 5 years. *Parenting: Science and Practice*, *9*, 78–100.

Sobolewski, J. M., & King, V. (2005). The importance of the coparental relationship for nonresident father's ties to children. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *67*, 1196–1212.

Sorensen, E. (2010). *Child support plays an increasingly important role for poor custodial families*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Thomas, A., & Sawhill, I. V. (2005). For love and money? The impact of family structure on family income. *The Future of Children*, *15*(2), 57–74.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2014). *State and county QuickFacts, Texas*. Retrieved from http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/48000.html

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2011, July). *Promoting responsible fatherhood: Effective parenting*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/Parenting/index.shtml

Waller, M. R., & Emory, A. D. (2014). Parenting apart: Differences between unmarried and divorced parents in separated families. *Family Court Review*, *52*, 686–703.

Waller, M. R., & Swisher, R. (2006). Fathers' risk factors in fragile families: Implications for "healthy" relationships and father involvement. *Social Problems*, *53*, 392–420.

Wolchik, S. A., Sandler, I. N., Millsap, R. E., Plummer, B. A., Greene, S. M., Anderson, E. R., et al. (2002). Six-year follow-up of preventive interventions for children of divorce: A randomized controlled trial. *JAMA*, *288*, 1874–1881.

Cynthia Osborne is an Associate Professor at the LBJ School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin. She is also the Director of the Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP) at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, where she has extensive experience conducting evaluations of state and national programs aimed at strengthening families and increasing fathers' emotional and financial contributions to their children. In this capacity, Dr. Osborne has launched several studies into the dynamics of nonmarital childbearing, paternity establishment, and child support. She has also led evaluation work on the Texas Home Visiting Program and the Project on Education Effectiveness and Quality (PEEQ).

Nora Ankrum is a Graduate Research Assistant at the Child and Family Research Partnership (CFRP), where she studies nonmarital childbearing, paternity establishment, and father involvement. As a journalist and Master of Public Affairs candidate at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, she studies and writes about issues involving energy, environmental policy, and urban development. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in English from The University of Texas at Austin.