

# The Psychological and Emotional Impact of Divorce: The Noncustodial Fathers' Perspective

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## Abstract

The current research investigated the personal experiences of young noncustodial fathers following separation and divorce. Using a focus group methodology, the researchers discovered and discussed young fathers' issues related to their children, their ex-partners and the judicial system. Results suggest that noncustodial fathers are difficult to engage, yet in need of help. In addition to recommending that counselors become more proactive in their work with noncustodial fathers, the authors discuss several implications for counselors working with young noncustodial fathers and give recommendations for further research.

THAT SINGLE FATHERS “can ‘mother’ as well as women” (DeMaris & Greif, 1992, p. 55) has now been fairly well established by empirical research (Blankenhorn, 1995; Lamb, 1999; Lazar & Guttman, 1998; Thomas & Forehand, 1993). Despite this, U.S. statistics reveal that 40% of American children do not live in homes where their fathers live, making fatherlessness “the most harmful trend of this generation” (Blankenhorn, 1995, p. 1). Proclaiming that the absence of fathers in the home is probably less alarming than our own absence of belief in fathers, Blankenhorn further questions our ability to find ways to “invigorate effective fatherhood as a norm of male behavior” (p. 2). Despite this trend away from the attitude that seems to undermine the importance of the father in the household, DeMaris and Greif (1992) presented data indicating that male head of households more than tripled in the United States from 1970 to 1990. These data seem to suggest that where fathers are present after separation and divorce, there is an increase in males receiving custody over their children. In British Columbia, according to the 1991 Census, lone-male parent families have increased by approximately 30% from 1981–1991 indicating that the number of father-headed lone parent families is also on the increase.

Jordan's (1985) review compared the effects of separation and divorce for both custodial and noncustodial

fathers and concluded that the most striking effects of divorce for men with children was in the area of mental health. Sixty to 80% of men in these studies reported long-lasting stress related symptoms, such as sleeplessness, crying, reduced energy, poor appetite and excessive tiredness. Research pertaining to noncustodial fathers after separation or divorce reported experiences of loss, grief, and sadness (Keshet & Rosenthal, 1978), loneliness (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), and inadequacy and feelings of incompetence (Hetherington & Cox, 1985). Despite the highly stressful nature of divorce, few men sought traditional clinical resources and tended to avoid professional contact; factors that may, according to Jacobs (1982), have contributed to the lack of research on noncustodial fathers.

Kruk (1993) studied the absent or disengaged father, which he believed was the most prevalent form of the noncustodial father. Looking for reasons why these fathers were absent or disengaged, Kruk pointed to the impact of the justice system in concluding that the mother was still considered the appropriate custodial parent. He also found that disagreements over custody and access were more likely in wife-initiated divorces; fathers wanting to remain actively involved with their children while the wives were reported as wanting a “clean break” (p. 19). Greif (1985) reported that most divorced fathers identified the lack of confirmation of

their role as fathers by their ex-wives and ex-wives' families as the major reason for their loss of contact with their children. Pruett and Pruett (1998) strongly suggested that men who are "visitors" do not have much impact on their children and that meaningful roles need to be created for noncustodial fathers that elevate their opportunities to contribute to their children's overall development. Nielsen (1999) suggested that recent research points to how divorced fathers are demeaned, demoralized, and disenfranchised following divorce in ways that make it difficult for them to maintain close relationships with their own children.

### Fathers Who Disengage

The research presents some interesting findings that may explain why fathers more than mothers will less likely and less frequently see their children after separation and divorce (Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson, & Zill, 1983; Nielsen, 1999). Hetherington and Cox (1985) and Tepp (1983) identified incompetence in the primary caretaker role as contributing to a major initial difficulty for noncustodial fathers. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) cited several reasons contributing to the noncustodial fathers' disengagement from their children:

- the problem of providing a home or homelike environment in which the children could be with their father,
- their lack of ability in dealing with their children's emotional needs,
- deficits in communication,
- the fathers' own heightened emotional tension, and
- the nature of the visits themselves.

Kruk (1993) and McMurray and Blackmore (1993) also identified ways in which the custodial mother discouraged contact with the children. Reasons listed included:

- denial of access,
- not having children ready or available for the access visit or changing the arrangement at the "last minute,"
- confrontation or conflict with the father at the time of the access visit,
- criticism of the father to the children, and
- periodic refusal of access or refusal of residential access.

These authors also noted that poor relationships with the ex-spouse resulted in difficulties in access to the children as well as loss of day-to-day contact with them. Tepp (1983) suggested that both the custodial and noncustodial parent share in the responsibility to "make it right" for children, that children do benefit from regular contact with the visiting parent. Regular and frequent visitation from the noncustodial father resulted in high self-esteem and an absence of depression in children (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Additionally, the fathers themselves, as well as members of their families, have an easier time adjusting when the fathers stay involved (Jacobs, 1982), play a significant role in terms of adolescent functioning (Thomas & Forehand, 1993), and contribute positively to educational performance of their children (Furr, 1998). Paradise (1998), arguing against what she considers the traditional presumption that children should remain in their mother's custody, suggested that fathers play significant roles in their children's lives, and in order to better their children's lives as well as their own, fathers should receive custody of their children more frequently after divorce.

Issues studied by researchers over the past 20 years pertaining to the well-being of children raised by single fathers have included: adjustment in men after divorce (Jacobs, 1992; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980); structure of families headed by single men (Demaris & Greif, 1992); issues related to the justice system after divorce (Greif, 1985); children's perceptions of their relationships with their fathers (McMurray & Blackmore, 1993), and why fathers disengage following divorce (Kruk, 1993). The focus of research, however, has been mostly on the experiences of fathers who have obtained custody of their children (see Greif, 1985) with a dearth of research on the experiences of men who do not have custody and who may have little or no visitation rights with their children. The purpose of the present study was to address the lack of research in this area and profile the experiences of noncustodial fathers following separation and divorce. It was hoped that with a greater understanding of noncustodial fathers, social workers, counselors and other service providers will find new ways and means of engaging and helping what has been, up to now, a very elusive group. Employing a focus group methodology, the current research interviewed noncustodial fathers as a means of obtaining a more comprehensive picture of their experiences following separation and divorce.

## METHODOLOGY

### **Design**

The current research examined the experiences of the less prevalent form of noncustodial fathers, encompassing those who were engaged with their children to different degrees or those who were attempting to be engaged in their children's lives, or both. This study used a focus group methodology to collect information from noncustodial fathers regarding their experiences. Stewart and Shadasani (1990) described the focus group method as a group interview well suited to producing a rich body of data that is expressed using the respondents' own words and context. The current focus groups were structured using broad open-ended questions as suggested by Kreuger (1994). These questions served to encourage a moderated discussion between participants within the group. Individual discussion as well as the discussion of issues between participants provided data for interpretation and analysis.

### **The Sample**

Participants in the current study were recruited from an outreach program for single fathers. Though these men participated in the focus groups and often talked about their program, the intent of the research was to understand the experiences of these fathers and not to evaluate the outreach program. The researchers acknowledge that participating in an outreach program provides experiences for these men that may be quite different than the experiences of fathers who have not availed of this experience. Participants ranged in age from 15 to 28 (mean = 22.3 years) with none of the fathers having custody of the children. A 15-year-old participant in the study was included because it was believed he would bring a perspective to the group that more clearly defined the overall experiences of young fathers.

All participants in the focus groups were either unemployed or had low-paying, hourly-wage jobs. None would be considered in a middle-income level. Greif (1985) in a very thorough literature review indicated that fathers studied tended to be mostly homogenous, White, middle-class, Protestant and Catholic, with a slightly higher than average income and some college education. Participants in the current study did not fit this profile. All participants had lived with their ex-spouse for 1 year or more; 15 had been married and three had had common law relationships. At the time of the interviews only three participants were in another committed relationship.

### **Procedure**

Three focus groups, lasting approximately 2.5 hours each and consisting of six fathers per group ( $N = 18$ ), were carried out over a period of 5 weeks. The facilitator for the outreach program contacted all fathers who said they wanted to participate in the interviews. Each focus group interview was led by two experienced group facilitators and was tape recorded for future analysis. One of these facilitators was one of the authors of this manuscript, and the second facilitator was a master's level counselor in the community. The authors did several things in the current study to ensure rigor. Prior to conducting the interviews, the two facilitators met on three occasions to review the interviewing protocol and discuss issues each person may be bringing to the session. Issues identified as possible biasing factors in the interviewing process revolved around one of the authors having been a custodial single father and the second facilitator being female. Following all sessions, the two facilitators met and debriefed the interviews, noting any inconsistencies in the application of the interview questions and process, discussing how specific questions did or did not work as well as clarifying observations on issues that arose in the interviews. All attempts were made to reduce bias resulting from the facilitators' personal experiences.

The questions used in this semi-structured interview process asked participants about their experiences of being in an outreach program for fathers and how the experience was helpful or not helpful to them. They were also asked about their experiences being in custody and their access to their children while in custody; the nature of their relationships with their ex-partners and their children; their experiences with the judicial system; their experiences with visitations with their children; and their experiences as fathers.

All interviews were transcribed and provided the data for the current analysis. The researchers rigorously read all interview transcripts three times in an attempt to capture the natural themes emerging from the focus groups. During the fourth reading of the data, the researchers marked all statements made by the fathers that pertained to or appeared to pertain to their experiences as noncustodial fathers. Because the facilitators concentrated on keeping the focus of the fathers' accounts on their own experiences, statements identified as tangential or innocuous were minimal compared to the number of statements related to the young men's experiences as noncustodial fathers. In total, this phase of the analysis produced 244 statements of the fathers' experiences. Based upon the initial identification of themes emerging

out of the original transcriptions, the researchers then re-read all statements and produced the final list of themes that are presented below. All statements pertaining to specific themes were then subsumed under the appropriate heading and sub-themes for each theme were then created depending upon the content of the statements. For example, one theme identified by the fathers was that of "Concerns related to relationship with children." From the 244 identified statements, all statements that referred to this theme were moved under this heading. The statements were then re-read and analyzed for sub-themes. In this example, the sub-themes created were:

- discipline concerns,
- wanting a presence in their children's lives, and the
- emotional concerns of children.

The same procedure was used for all remaining statements.

## Results

Respondents in this study believed that noncustodial fathers had concerns and needs that were not being addressed by society at large. Overall, they believed there was considerable discrimination in the justice system when it came to fathers' rights versus mothers' rights, with the latter having greater control over how the court determined custody and access. Furthermore, respondents had strong opinions regarding their relationship with their ex-partners and their relationship with their children. Findings from the study were categorized and described using the following headings:

- judicial system concerns,
- fathering needs and concerns,
- issues related to visitations,
- relationship issues with their ex-partners and children,
- emotions, self-esteem, and self-confidence issues, and
- the impact of the outreach program for fathers.

With respect to the last category, participants were very enthusiastic about their experiences in the outreach program and provided information that could not be ignored even though the program itself was not the focus of the research. A summary of the specific issues within each of these categories is discussed below.

### **Judicial System Concerns**

The greatest proportion of statements made by the respondents referred to their negative experiences with the

judicial system. There was a general sense of frustration, anger, and helplessness by all those who had encountered the judicial system and who had to deal with issues of custody, access and maintenance payments. These sentiments were summed up by one father who said, "My biggest frustration is the law." These "frustrations with the law" revolved around a lack of confidence that the court would come out in his favor; that as a father he possessed fewer rights than the mother of his child, and that his involvement in the judicial system came at an emotional and financial cost he felt he could ill-afford.

There was general agreement within the groups that seemed to be summed up by the statements: "I do not have a positive hope that I will win in the court room," and "In court, I already have the attitude that I am going to lose." Moreover, most respondents doubted that they would find a lawyer willing to take their case forward. Comments like, "Lawyers won't even talk about full custody unless you got a hundred thousand dollars," were reflective of the fathers' perceptions that lawyers would have to fight tough in order to win in a system they believed was discriminating against them. When cases were taken to court, the fathers expressed comments reflecting their lack of confidence that the judge would rule in their favor: "The judge didn't seem to care," "Any accusation against the father is automatically taken as guilty until proven innocent," and "There's only three things a father can do to win custody of a child: if the mother abuses the child, does drugs, or is an alcoholic." Some fathers felt that if they did fight for their rights in court, the mother would then deny them future access to their children.

The belief that the fathers interviewed possessed fewer rights than the mothers of the children came through very strongly. Sample comments from the fathers included: "As soon as the divorce happens you are at the whims of the mother." "Judges still side with the mother because they still believe that the child should be raised with the mother." "In court, the mother does not have to prove that she is a mother." "In the field of parenting, we are not equals at all. When it comes to parenting, we are considered inferior," and, "It is assumed that the mother is gonna be a better parent all around."

Being on the defensive when it came to judicial matters continued throughout the interviews. Fathers voiced their experiences of having to fight an ongoing battle on what they considered to be an unfair playing field. Comments like, "From day one, I've been on the defense the whole time," "I had to take a parenting course to prove to the court that I was able to parent," and "What she said was gold and what I said was mud. I got tired of de-

fending myself. This was about our fifth war battle over access,” were typical.

The experiences expressed by the fathers over what they described as ordeals with the judicial system begs the question of how they were able to cope emotionally, psychologically and financially. That it took an emotional toll could be inferred by one man’s comment: “An accusation takes me forever to clear up and then there are 10 more waiting for me.” For some, giving up seemed like the logical option, yet, many of the fathers appeared determined to have a measure of involvement in their children’s lives despite the battles they felt they had to wage: “The only way to get what I want and what the court order says, is to go back and do it all over again.” Fathers said they felt emotionally drained by what they perceived as constant battling: “I find it a lot of pressure fighting for access to my kids all the time.”

### **Fathering Needs and Concerns**

Fathers’ needs and concerns, an identified theme, were subdivided into how they perceived themselves as a father, how others perceived their fathering skills and their views of their overall experience as a father. The fathers expressed a sense of pride in being fathers. It was important to them that they fulfilled what it meant to be a good father and, more importantly, that their children perceived them as good fathers. Comments like, “I was always a good father. I never once doubted myself, maybe I could have been a better husband,” reflected a view held by several fathers in the group, one that drew a distinction between the roles of being a father and that of being a husband. In the latter case, one wonders how much of their perceived failure as a husband contributed to their difficulties after separation versus that of being a bad father.

The role of fathering appeared to be taken quite seriously and there seemed to be an acceptance that one’s life had to change in order to meet the responsibilities offered by that role, e.g. “I was a party animal until my son was born,” and “Being a father means not being able to party as much anymore.” Acceptance of their children’s perception of them also seemed to contribute to their view of themselves as fathers: “Sometimes my kids say things to me that make me proud to be a father.”

Contrary to their own positive views of themselves as fathers were the competing views of others in their lives. A large majority of the fathers in the focus group did not feel respected as fathers by their ex-spouses. Though some of them felt inexperienced as fathers, they also believed that the child’s mother did not give them a

chance to begin with, or they were told they needed to have a parenting course. They expressed the view that their ex-partners did not trust them with the children: “My ex does not have confidence in me that I can be a good father.” Other fathers suggested that their ex-partners thought that they [the fathers] would be off partying when the children were with them. On the whole, however, the fathers said they were proud to be fathers and that even though it was often a battle to be engaged with their children, the whole experience of fatherhood was quite rewarding

### **Relationship With Ex-Partner and Children**

What seemed paramount in the fathers’ reported experiences were their relationship with their ex-partners. Most of the fathers said they did not have positive relationships with their children’s mother. The fathers who were in conflict were also the ones who related difficulties with visitations and with having to go back and forth to the court. Fathers who reported positive relationships with their ex-partners generally reported more positive experiences with visitations and generally had no court-related issues. The sub-themes emerging from this category revolved around continuing relationships issues, their ex-partners’ expressed lack of confidence in their [the fathers’] parenting ability and interference in access to their child(ren). The intent here is to show some of the issues raised that have had an impact on their ongoing relationships.

In addition to the ex-partners’ lack of confidence in their parenting abilities and the difficulties fathers encountered with visitations, fathers also expressed frustration with what they believed was a lot of interference from their ex-partners’ parents. Statements like, “I think it’s mostly her parents running everything,” “Her mom is a man hater,” and “Her parents are totally supporting her and the baby,” reflected the fathers’ perception that the extended family of their ex-partner interfered a lot and that what they did and said influenced his relationship with his ex-partner, especially when it came to visitation rights.

Fathers often expressed the view that they contributed significantly to the family income when the father and mother were living together, but since separating, they felt the financial support had gone unacknowledged, e.g. “I was the only one that ever worked and supported my family,” and “I looked after my ex-wife and she never had to pay a bill.” Having contributed to the family financially, fathers expressed resentment over what they felt was ill-treatment by their

ex-partner: “The one thing that really bugs me is I have to pay her alimony for her throwing me out.” Despite these resentments and feelings that the ex-partner “doesn’t always respect what [I] say,” there was general agreement that a positive relationship with the ex-partner was a goal towards which they all strived, albeit for the sake of minimizing conflicts and problems with visitations (“You’re screwed unless you have a friendship with the mother”) and for the well-being of the children: “I’m trying to keep us on a talking, calm, friendly relationship for the sake of my son.”

Concerns related to their children related only minimally with discipline (as in who disciplines more effectively) but more significantly related to the emotional well being of their children and wanting to have a presence in the lives of their children. Fathers expressed a need to be involved with their children: “If you want to relate well with your kids you have to be in their life,” “Being a week-end dad is not enough for me.” Some fathers felt they did not want their children to experience what they themselves experienced as children: “I don’t want him to grow up and think that I’ve ever abandoned him like my dad did to me.” Some expressed emotional concerns related to their children being exposed to the influences of other men (“I feel I get all my kids grief when other men are brought into their lives”) and that they worried a lot about their children.

### Concerns Related to Visitations

Fathers reported considerable difficulties in their attempts to have meaningful visitations with their children. Not surprisingly, the issues surrounding visitations were related to issues surrounding the fathers’ views of the judicial system and their experiences with the courts and lawyers. Relationship difficulties with their ex-partners, as discussed above, also placed the visitation issue within a larger, understandable context. Statements related to visitation concerns were thematically arranged under the headings: threats and intimidation from ex-partners, emotional toll of visitations, and limitations imposed on visitations.

Fathers said they sometimes received threats of violence when they went to take their children for a visit. One father discussed sending someone else to get his children because the relationship with his ex-partner had deteriorated too much. Typically, however, threats had more to do with losing visitation privileges and that unless they [the fathers] acted appropriately (defined by what they felt their ex-partner wanted), they would not see their chil-

dren. The fathers also discussed how they were unable to talk to their children if they missed a child maintenance payment, how children would not be ready for pre-arranged visits, or that there were last-minute cancellations: “Out of the holidays that went by I should have had him once but she says no every time,” “What bothers me is that she has the final say [about visitations],” “If the kid’s mom wanted to be real cruel, I would never see the kids”.

Not all fathers expressed problems with access, but the majority felt they did not have enough, that there were unreasonable limitations imposed on their visits, and generally felt controlled by the whims of the mother: “I just went to court last week and I get like two hours a week.” Some of the barriers to what they believed were reasonable access to their children included having to have supervised visits, only seeing the children on weekends, no overnight visits, and their ex-partner moving to live in another city. Overall, the fathers felt helpless in what they believed they could demand from the mother: “If I push my visitation rights too much, I’m hurting myself farther down the road. She’ll just start saying no to all the holidays.” Regardless, the fathers expressed a desire to have normal ongoing relationships with proper visitations. These sentiments were reflected in this statement: “My ideal is to have proper access, proper visitations, summers, Christmas break, and none of the garbage that goes on in between.”

### Emotions, Self-Esteem, and Self-Confidence

Fathers, quite emphatically, said that the post-separation experience was emotionally difficult and impacted on their feelings about themselves and their self-confidence. Fathers reported considerable angst, hurt and what they referred to as “devastation” following the break-up with their partners. The predominant expression of their emotions came through as anger. Though they spoke freely about this anger, they rarely expressed other emotions: “I don’t have an anger problem anymore,” “I don’t yell a lot or ever unless I blow up,” and, “I have a lot of anger because of a lack of money.” Some fathers reported not having a temper or being easily angered and some said they had already completed anger management programs. Anger and the need to control it was recognized by a majority of the participating fathers.

Fathers expressed a lot of stress in their lives with a need to relax more, gain a better understanding of themselves, and get more in tune with their feelings. Having gone through the upheaval of the divorce and separation from their families, while trying to balance their lives more, fathers in this study talked about their difficulties

understanding their feelings: “I need to understand my feelings,” “I’m in a situation where I don’t even know myself and my feelings,” and “It’s hard for me to understand my feelings.” Some fathers said they were getting more in touch with their feelings, whereas others expressed a need “to understand [my] feelings.”

Overall, a general lack of self-esteem and self-confidence prevailed among many fathers in the interview groups. Contributing heavily to this was a lack of work and financial difficulties. Statements reflecting fathers’ lack of self-esteem and self-confidence included the following: “I feel trapped,” “Nothing seems to go right,” “It seems like I’m a jinx,” “I feel like things are never going to change,” “I feel I have no direction in my life” and “My ex-partner’s mother calls me a loser.” Many fathers expressed a desire or need or both to put their lives back on a more positive track: “I feel I need to go out and get more knowledge,” “I believe having a child has helped me straighten my life out quite a bit,” and “I’m getting my crap together before I make solid plans with my child.” On a more positive note, one father expressed his view that “No matter what I do, I try to keep a positive attitude.”

## Outreach Program for Fathers

Though the current research employed focus groups interviews, all participants were or had been members of an outreach program for fathers. It is important to include their observations on the program, because it is believed their experiences would be unique to the fathers in question, but would not pertain to fathers who did not participate in such a program. The natural themes arising from the father’s statements about their program were:

- the lack of services available to men,
- reasons for joining a fathers’ program,
- how the program helped them, and
- recommendations they had regarding the program.

The men in the current program included those who were referred by various agencies in the city but also contained men who were actively looking for services for fathers. Most of the men in the groups commented that they were invited to join the group “over coffee” with the outreach worker. The informal approach of the outreach worker seemed to work quite well with these men. Participants who actively sought this type of service expressed frustration that many services existed in the city, but practically none were for men: “When I first got into

trouble with the courts, I picked up a few service directories. If you’re female or native, your choices are countless. There should be more programs for males,” “I had been looking around for some kind of support group for men because there really aren’t a lot around,” “I went to local women’s services; you almost feel like a second-class citizen. When I came in, they had a look like I’m the wife beater or something,” and “I phoned a couple of places but they said, ‘Well, we don’t deal with men, we don’t work with men.’” In addition to the expressed lack of service, these men said they felt intimidated by and discriminated against by service agencies for women. The men gave several reasons for joining the outreach program:

- getting access to their children,
- getting support for when they had to go to court to gain that access,
- learning from the experiences of other fathers (“I want to learn from them before I make the same mistakes.”), and
- for counseling and emotional support (“I felt lost, nowhere to go, seemed that all my avenues were closed,” “I got pretty down and depressed,” “The divorce really crushed my self-esteem.”).

The benefits to having joined the program gave rise to four subthemes:

- sharing with other men,
- helping other dealing with their problems,
- emotional support, and
- parenting support.

The fathers were very positive in acclaiming the benefits they felt they were receiving from the program in each of these areas. The act of sharing with other men proved very empowering because they said it helped them understand their own experiences more, gave them a feeling that they were supported, and gave them courage to continue in their commitment to their children. They also reported that listening to other men gave them more understanding and respect for relationships as well as a better understanding of how to more effectively handle their own problems. One father proclaimed: “Fathers’ programs give fathers a better understanding of how to deal with problems and issues.” The fathers also indicated that this program helped them develop a more positive and optimistic outlook, helped them get in touch with their feelings, helped them keep their focus on their children, and, overall, increased their

self-esteem: "I'm basically getting out of it what I wanted which is to feel better about everything," "This program is reinforcing my self-esteem, knowing that I was a good father and still can be." "Nobody that knows me has ever said in the slightest that I was a bad father, but what I got out of this was the feeling that I was [a bad father] until I started coming here." Fathers believed the program benefited them in becoming better parents. Many said that prior to the program they were good fathers but not necessarily good husbands, but the program changed their opinions of themselves: "The program lets you look at how you really are as a father because being a father changes your whole life, your whole personality." Another father said: "I sit here at our meetings and think, I wish they had told me to come to a program like this before my son was born ... not 4 years after, and he's gone out of my life, almost."

## Conclusions and Implications

The current study explored the post separation/divorce experiences of young noncustodial fathers. Themes were identified from interviews with three different focus groups as well as comments regarding the fathers' experiences with an outreach program. The data, gathered and analyzed, indicated that the experiences of fathers in the current study were many and varied, but had a great deal in common with each other. For example, for several of the participants, anger was problematic in their life; yet, for others it wasn't. Though the majority of these noncustodial fathers had problems with access to their children, other participants were satisfied with their access. Though the intent of our investigation was to determine the variety of experiences of noncustodial fathers, we were unable to substantiate the claims made by the men. Because the investigation did not interview couples or the ex-partners of these men, a picture of "the full story" was not achieved. However, research seldom allows us to achieve such a broad picture. In addition, the data from the current study examined fathers who were in a supportive outreach program and this may account for the more negative expression of experiences to the detriment of positive experiences. Further research would benefit from examining the experiences of noncustodial fathers who were not in this type of program. The current study did, however, enable the researchers to begin to profile the post separation/divorce experiences of fathers who are not disengaged as fathers but who are involved in trying to put their lives back on track.

Arising out of the identified themes were issues and implications for what it means to be a noncustodial father. Overall, fathers in the current study do not provide us with a very positive picture of their experiences. That fathers want to be involved with their children is certainly evident from the sample studied. And, though one could argue that the sample is biased because these were men who were getting support and help, it is important to note that these men were reporting very positive experiences as a result of coming together with other men. Information gathered from the participants also indicated fathers' difficulties with accessing community services, a factor that may be related to why there are more disengaged than engaged noncustodial fathers. The author's own experiences in this field indicates that many of the programs available to men have more to do with helping them curb unhealthy and pathologically oriented behaviors than offering them positively oriented skills aimed at their growth as men and as fathers.

Information gleaned from the current study presents an uncertain future for our post-separation, post-divorce fathers. They report feeling lost, unsupported with difficulties locating services and express their difficulty at reaching out even when they know help is available. This is not surprising given the fathers' versions of experiences that contributed to their belief that they were not good fathers. Yet, for those fathers who were reaching out for help, the future looked more optimistic. Some of the young fathers acknowledged they were not always good husbands nor good fathers. Some of them suggested they contributed to their own difficulties by wanting to maintain a lifestyle similar to the one they had prior to having a child. These fathers said they wanted to be models of behavior for, and have positive relationships with, their children. They wanted healthier relationships with their ex-partners and wanted to be good parents.

From a counseling perspective, much has already been inferred in terms of what can be done for fathers. Results from this study seem to indicate that outreach programs have a positive impact on fathers. However, many men seem to have difficulty reaching out and asking for help so alternative means of accessing fathers may be necessary. Traditional advertising may still be useful in accessing some men but this needs to be extended and promoted beyond a local level. The plight of noncustodial fathers could be considered similar to that of drunk driving or domestic violence: as a major social problem and addressed with a national action plan. These men say they need to receive positive messages that they, as fathers, are valued, and that their children



benefit from their involvement. Programs could be developed that reach out to fathers, that go out and search for them rather than waiting for them to come forward. These proactive efforts may prove more effective than traditional means in helping men get back into positive fathering and positive parenting. Interestingly, the one consistent comment of how fathers in the current study became involved in the outreach program was “coffee” and “chatting” with the outreach worker who persuaded them to come to a meeting.

Prior research has, to a degree, addressed the need for the delivery of services to fathers. Arising from the current investigation we offer recommendations based upon the young fathers’ expressed frustration of not having had access to much support and services when they felt they most needed it as well as research that recommends early intervention with young parents. Given that an emphasis has been given to the issues of education and employment, we believe that intervention programs could be provided for teenage fathers as well as for those young fathers who have finished or have left school. Kiselica and Murphy (1994) focused on ways to help teenage fathers enjoy economic self-sufficiency and a gratifying life style, proposing that career counseling should be done within a larger, more comprehensive service program. Kiselica and Stroud (1992) discussed issues they believed pertained to the special counseling needs of fathers: relationship counseling to address issues with their partners and their families; assistance with housing, employment, job training, and education; instruction in child care and financial planning; health care for their children, and emotional support. Kiselica and Pfaller (1993), along a similar vein, suggested that school counselors could independently help teenage parents by developing outreach strategies and establishing rapport by addressing educational-career and personal concerns, and by effective utilization of referral services. They also suggested that the counselor educator and the school counselor could collaborate by offering internships and teenage-parent service programs.

In the last decade, there has been a growing awareness that services to men need to be improved (Huey, 1987; Kiselica & Murphy, 1994). Kiselica and Sturmer (1993), for example, examined the availability of services for teenage fathers using data from 149 agencies and found that, as predicted, more of the services were available in agency settings for the teenage mothers than for the teenage fathers. Despite the lack of services to fathers, programs are being developed both within and outside of school settings so as to meet the needs of fa-

thers. Ginsberg’s (1995) Parent–Adolescent Relationship Development (PARD), for example, is a relationship enhancement therapy program created to teach communication and relationship skills and improve relationships between fathers and sons. Kiselica and Rotzien’s (1994) group psychoeducational course teaches teenage fathers how to be loving parents. Barth and Claycomb’s (1988) program encourages teen fathers to get involved in all services available to female clients, including counseling, health care, educational programs, prepared childbirth classes, and parent training. Huey (1987) also developed a group counseling program for unwed teenage fathers (MALE), designed to help them understand their emotional and legal rights and to make use of available resources. An evaluation of participation in the MALE sessions indicated that awareness of the possibility of pregnancy increased and that attitudes toward abortion and contraception changed.

Though it is important to provide services for young fathers at a community level, services can also be provided to young fathers at the junior high and high school levels. Counselors can be proactive by providing information and seminars to young men as well as offering them counseling and support if they become fathers. Mentoring programs for these fathers could also prove to be very useful and worthwhile. Information on birth control, sex education, or family life programs are generally important components of a school’s curriculum but more is needed for those men who become fathers at a very early age. Some of the suggestions for social workers, counselors, and other human service providers arising out of the review of the literature as well as from the current investigation include, but are not restricted to, the following recommendations:

- help keep fathers in school or provide other means of helping them continue their education.
- provide relationship counseling with the father and the child’s mother so that they both can learn how to have a positive, continuing presence in the child’s life.

As suggested above, several young fathers identified how their own actions contributed to alienating their partner. Community agencies and schools could work to help and support young couples deal with the issues of having children at an early age:

- have general discussion groups around the rights and responsibilities of both people in the child’s life,

- be proactive in getting the fathers into either school-based or community-based programs for fathers, and
- become more community active and contribute to coordinating current services for women with those needed by men (e.g. pregnancy outreach programs).

These suggestions promote activities that are far from exhausting what we, as educators, counselors, and social workers, can practice in order to help fathers with their own lives as well as the lives of their children.

Research that involves qualitatively examining people's experiences provides us with valuable knowledge. Yet, the current study begs for further investigation of issues that were discussed but not investigated in depth. For example, examining issues at the level of the relationship would provide us with very valuable information as would studies aimed at investigating the issues which came out of the current study. A more thorough investigation of the interaction of the father and the judicial system as well as an examination of issues around visitations would both be valuable avenues to follow. The current study suggests that there continues an urgent need to address the issues of noncustodial fathers before they become disengaged from their children's lives.

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