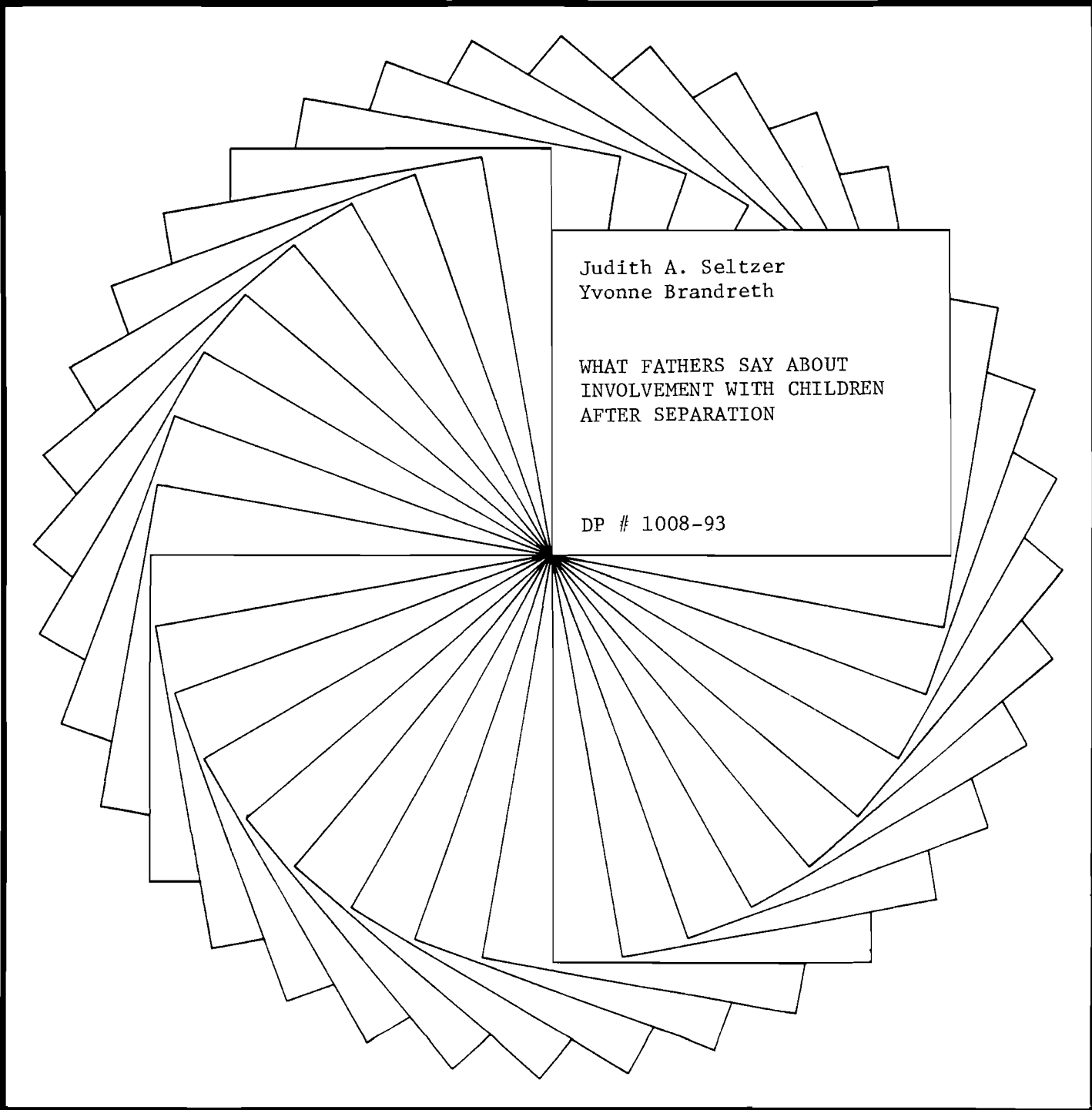


# Institute for Research on Poverty

## Discussion Papers



Judith A. Seltzer  
Yvonne Brandreth

WHAT FATHERS SAY ABOUT  
INVOLVEMENT WITH CHILDREN  
AFTER SEPARATION

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**What Fathers Say about Involvement with Children after Separation**

Judith A. Seltzer

Yvonne Brandreth

Department of Sociology  
and  
Center for Demography and Ecology  
University of Wisconsin-Madison 53706-1393

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the potential impact of nonresponse on information about paternal involvement after separation by comparing the sample of mothers whose children have a nonresident father to the sample of nonresident fathers in the National Survey of Families and Households. We show that when the samples are restricted to parents of children who were born in a first marriage, resident mothers and nonresident fathers are similar on a variety of demographic characteristics, including racial composition, family size, and duration of separation. Although resident mothers and nonresident fathers in the restricted sample report more similar levels of paternal involvement after divorce than in the comparison of the unrestricted samples, fathers still report greater paternal involvement than do mothers. Whether the respondent is the mother or father does not affect the factors that predict variation in child support receipts/payments or visits between nonresident fathers and children. The last part of the paper examines nonresident fathers' attitudes toward their role as a parent. Fathers' evaluations of their role depend more on their remarriage and characteristics of the children in their new household than on involvement with children from a previous relationship.

Divorce, like marriage, comes in two varieties -- his and hers (Bernard, 1978). Even more than within marriage, where they share their children and financial resources, men's and women's experiences of separation and divorce differ. Children are more likely to live with their mothers than their fathers after marital disruption (Sweet & Bumpass, 1987; Seltzer, 1990; Maccoby, Depner, & Mnookin, 1988). Fathers, in part because their children do not live with them, fare better economically than mothers (Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986). Despite the clear differences in fathers' and mothers' experiences of divorce, most knowledge of parenting and children's welfare after separation comes from resident mothers' reports. This is particularly troublesome for policymakers who try to improve children's economic welfare by reforming the child support system (e.g., Furstenberg, Sherwood, & Sullivan, 1992; Haskins, 1988). Reforms attempt to alter the behavior of nonresident parents, usually fathers. Without information about the financial resources and beliefs of these major actors, policy changes may not be effective.

Resident mothers and nonresident fathers differ in their economic interests in matters of child support, and the few studies which are able to compare parents' reports show that nonresident fathers report paying more child support than mothers report receiving (Schaeffer, Seltzer, & Klawitter, 1991; Braver, Fitzpatrick, & Bay, 1991; Sonenstein & Calhoun, 1990). Differences in parents' reports result, in part, from higher rates of survey participation for resident mothers than nonresident fathers (Schaeffer et al., 1991; Cherlin, Griffith, & McCarthy, 1983). Although nonresident fathers may report higher child support payments because of the social desirability of paying child support, nonresident fathers may also include in their reports financial transfers of which mothers are ignorant, such as visitation expenses and direct payments to children or to a third party on the children's behalf (e.g., paying a physician or dentist for a child's check-up). Similarly, our knowledge of what happens during nonresident fathers' visits with their children comes from mothers, who are unlikely to be present to observe what goes on (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985). Fathers are also more appropriate respondents to questions about their problems in arranging visits, although both parents' reports would

be preferable (e.g., Braver, Wolchik, et al., 1991). Nonresident fathers certainly are better sources of information about their own attitudes toward the children and their paternal responsibilities.

This paper uses data from the 1987-1988 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to describe nonresident fathers' involvement with children in the fathers' own words. The paper has three goals. First, it describes nonresident fathers using data from the NSFH, a recent, nationally representative sample of adults. Based on unmatched samples of parents, the description focuses on the degree to which the sample of nonresident fathers resembles a comparable sample of resident mothers on social, economic, and demographic characteristics. Second, it examines levels of paternal involvement, including financial transfers to children, such as child support and frequency of visits, and compares nonresident fathers' reports to those of resident mothers. We ask whether nonresident fathers and mothers describe paternal involvement in the same way once differences in the rates of survey participation are taken into account. The third goal is to describe nonresident fathers' attitudes about their role as a parent.

## **NONRESIDENT FATHERS AND THE PATERNAL ROLE**

### **WHEN DO MEN ACT LIKE FATHERS?**

Marriage and parenthood are becoming increasingly separate institutions in the United States (Cherlin, 1988). Nearly a quarter of births occur to unmarried parents, and about half of children will experience the break-up of their parents' marriage during childhood (National Center for Health Statistics, 1990: Table 1-31; Bumpass & Sweet, 1989). Many of these children acquire social parents through their biological parents' remarriage and nonmarital cohabitation (Bumpass & Sweet, 1989), although the process of acquisition is often complex (Mott, 1990). Because children in single-parent households usually live with their mothers, the father role is in considerable flux, both for men who live apart from their biological children and for those who live with the biological children of another man (e.g., Furstenberg, 1988; Seltzer, 1991; Marsiglio, 1992). Men's rights and responsibilities to children may be codified in custody and child support laws, but the role of father for separated and

divorced men is largely voluntary. Evidence of voluntarism comes from surveys showing low rates of child support awards and payments and limited social contact with children after separation (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1991: Table C; Furstenberg et al., 1983; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988), despite federal and state efforts to improve child support enforcement and mothers' claims that they prefer fathers to be involved after separation (Furstenberg, 1988). Certainly some men show strong commitment to their paternal responsibilities despite the difficulty of negotiating their involvement with the children's mother, a (sometimes) uncooperative former spouse or lover. Understanding the role of nonresident fathers requires more information about how fathers view their responsibilities to children and how they view the costs and benefits of their relationships with children. To date, social research offers little insight into the factors or individual characteristics that encourage some men to continue acting like fathers even when they no longer live with their children. Fathers' involvement with children before a separation may explain some nonresident fathers' greater investment in childrearing, but the evidence on this is mixed (Lowery, 1986; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980a; Wallerstein & Huntington, 1983). Although few men anticipate divorce and becoming a nonresident father (Lund, 1987), the attitudes toward family responsibilities and fatherhood developed during marriage may be important determinants of continued involvement after disruption.

#### NONRESIDENT FATHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD PARENTHOOD

*Attitudes and survey participation.* Nonresident fathers may express attitudes toward the role of father in a way that makes it particularly difficult to study such men. They may express their feelings about paternity by denying that they have children who live elsewhere. Men may feel no emotional ties to children whom they see infrequently, if at all (Furstenberg, 1988), and some men may not know that they are biological fathers. Survey coverage of nonresident fathers is poor, both for national surveys, such as the Current Population Survey (Cherlin et al., 1983), and surveys of child support populations (Schaeffer et al., 1991). Thus, any study of men's attitudes toward the role of nonresident father must confront the question of how nonresponse affects the degree to which the

findings characterize all men who might have biological children living elsewhere. Because it is important to know fathers' views of the separation process and their attitudes toward continued involvement with children, we attempt to identify a sample of nonresident fathers for which bias from nonparticipation is less severe. Our strategy is to restrict attention to a smaller, but well-defined subsample of fathers, using a demographic characteristic of the families prior to separation to define the sample. This approach differs from previous strategies by identifying samples based on an independent variable that may predict paternal involvement. Previous strategies either compare resident and nonresident parents without attention to differences in survey participation rates (e.g., Stephen, 1989) or identify resident and nonresident parents who report similar levels of involvement, thereby selecting the sample on the basis of the dependent variable (e.g., Peterson & Nord, 1987). Sampling on the dependent variable biases parameter estimates from the conventional statistical models that researchers generally use to examine fathers' contact with children after separation.

*Sources of variation in fathers' attitudes.* Nonresident fathers' attitudes toward parenthood depend on their (a) current family arrangements, (b) relationships with their former spouses and children, (c) social background, including education and other aspects of fathers' social placement, and (d) involvement with nonresident children. Current family arrangements include whether the nonresident father is remarried or living in a nonmarital union, whether he lives with other children, and the characteristics of these children (e.g., biological or stepchildren). Women mediate men's relationships with children by supervising and delegating childrearing tasks to fathers when both parents live with their children (Backett, 1987). However, little is known about how second wives or cohabiting partners affect nonresident fathers' activities and attitudes about caring for children who live with their mother. When nonresident fathers remarry, they decrease their involvement with children from a previous relationship, perhaps because the new relationship competes with earlier ones for the father's time and attention (Furstenberg et al., 1983; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988; Seltzer, 1991). Some fathers who remarry, however, may do so because they hold strong family values, which lead to

their continued commitment to paternal responsibilities to children after divorce. If their new wives share these family values, they may facilitate nonresident fathers' involvement with children.

The number, sex, and biological/step composition of children with whom men live may also affect their attitudes about being a parent. The more children for whom fathers are responsible, the more complicated and unmanageable it may be to look after them. On the other hand, having more children may also make the tasks of childrearing more interesting and sociable. Fathers are more involved in childrearing when they have sons (Morgan, Lye, & Condran, 1988; Marsiglio, 1991), but their greater involvement may increase the strains of being a parent. Whether the children are biological or stepchildren also affects fathers' attitudes about childrearing. Men who live with stepchildren adopt many of the tasks of childrearing, but they are less engaged socially and emotionally with their stepchildren than are resident biological fathers (Thomson, McLanahan, & Curtin, 1992). Stepfamily relationships are more complex than those in original families, and require that "relative strangers" become intimates in a short period of time (Beer, 1988). When men live with both biological and stepchildren, they are more likely to see themselves as father-like in their stepfather role than when they live with stepchildren only (Marsiglio, 1992). Thus, men who live with both biological and stepchildren may perceive greater benefits of paternity, but they may also view the task of balancing the competing demands of biological and stepchildren as complicated.

Nonresident fathers' attitudes about parenting also depend on the characteristics of the ex-wife/partner and of their nonresident children. Resident mothers may be gatekeepers who limit fathers' contacts with children or the conditions under which contact may occur (e.g., Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980b), thus continuing women's management of the father-child relationship even after separation. Resident mother's remarriage may decrease paternal involvement after separation, perhaps because remarriage increases the complexity and strains of balancing older and new family relationships (e.g., Furstenberg et al., 1983; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988). Resident mothers' education may also affect nonresident fathers' attitudes about childrearing. Resident mothers with more



education may be better able to support themselves and therefore have greater independence from their children's nonresident fathers than mothers with less education. Mother's education also affects how they structure their own and their children's time (Medrich et al., 1983). Highly educated mothers may exercise more control over children's schedules, limiting nonresident fathers' own responsibility for coordinating children's time commitments. The number and sex of nonresident children may also affect fathers' attitudes toward parenthood in much the same way that children's characteristics affect fathers' attitudes when they share the same household. However, evidence on nonresident fathers' greater involvement with sons than daughters after divorce is mixed (Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Furstenberg et al., 1983; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988; Seltzer, 1991; Mott, 1993).

Fathers' social background, particularly education, is another source of variation in their attitudes about being a parent. A father's education affects his attitudes about having children (Hoffman & Manis, 1979), the values he thinks are important for children to learn (Alwin, 1984), and his attitudes about how women and men should divide family responsibilities (Mason & Lu, 1988). Fathers with higher education may be more involved in childrearing, in light of the positive association between education and egalitarian gender-role attitudes. When fathers are more involved, they are likely to view childrearing as more social. Nonresident fathers with higher educations may be more critical of their own and of resident mothers' performances as parents. Highly educated fathers may also see the tasks of childrearing as complicated if they have greater exposure to theories of child development and childrearing manuals.

Finally, fathers who maintain close ties with their children who live elsewhere may derive greater benefits of parenthood. They are likely to see the activities of childrearing as more sociable and interesting. Nonresident fathers who see their children frequently and who pay child support are more likely to think that they are doing a good job of being a father, compared to those who do not keep ties to children. Alternatively, fathers who find the tasks of parenting especially onerous or

painful may respond by disengaging from their nonresident children and limiting their participation in childrearing after divorce (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978; Lund, 1987).

## METHODS

### SAMPLE

Ideal data for a problem of this type would include a sample in which both parents reported about childrearing after separation. In the best of all possible worlds, these reports would be supplemented by data from an external criterion which could be used to validate mothers' and fathers' reports about the same outcome (joint legal custody, paying child support, etc.). These data requirements cannot be met by large, national surveys; yet data from national surveys are essential for describing the family and living arrangements of U.S. children. This paper uses data from independent (unmatched), cross-sectional samples of nonresident fathers and resident mothers in the 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH). The NSFH is a probability sample of adults living in households, with oversamples of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, single-parents and stepparents, cohabiting couples, and recently married persons. We use sample weights to take account of unequal probabilities of sample selection (Sweet, Bumpass, & Call, 1988).

We use data from primary respondents. The first stage of the analysis uses data from approximately 1,500 mothers who live with children under 18 whose father is living in another household, and approximately 480 fathers who report that they have children under 18 living in another household with their mother. Both samples include parents whose children were born in and outside of marriages. The unit of analysis in each subsample is the family defined by the parent's report. The overall response rate for the survey was 74%, but response rates were lower for never-married, separated, and divorced men (Sweet & Bumpass, 1989).

The second stage of the analysis uses data from those divorced nonresident fathers who responded to the self-administered questionnaire items about attitudes toward parenthood (n=184). Nonresident fathers for whom the attitude items are missing were less likely to live with other minor

children, to pay any child support, or to visit their nonresident children. This suggests that men for whom paternal responsibilities are less salient are underrepresented in the section of the analysis dealing with role attitudes.

## PROCEDURES AND MEASURES

The NSFH questionnaire was designed to obtain the same information about the nonresident parents' involvement with children from both resident and nonresident parents. Questions about nonresident parents' contact with children asked about contact with a randomly selected child identified at the beginning of the sequence about nonresident parents' involvement. The sequence also included measures of conflict between parents on six aspects of postseparation childrearing and a small number of items asking the respondent to describe the other parent's characteristics, such as whether the parent had remarried and had children since the break-up of the previous relationship. In addition, the questionnaire includes detailed education, marriage, and fertility histories, which we use to determine respondents' education at marriage, parents' marital status when the random child was born, and time separated. For ever-married respondents, the data include information about the characteristics of the respondent's first spouse at the time of marriage. The first part of this paper uses data from personal interviews with resident mothers and with nonresident fathers. The second part combines the personal interview data with information from a self-administered questionnaire completed at the time of the survey to describe nonresident fathers' attitudes. Respondents were asked how they evaluated their experience as parents on six dimensions, measured as semantic differentials. The question begins with the instruction: "If you do not have any children under age 19, skip to...." The introduction to the semantic differentials asks: "How would you describe the things you do as a parent? Would you say that they were...." The items refer to all parenting activities, without specifying that respondents should think only about the children who live with (or apart) from them, and without referencing a specific child. The semantic differentials have values ranging from 1 to 7, and include these pairs of contrasts: boring vs. interesting, unappreciated vs. appreciated, lonely vs.

sociable, poorly done vs. well done, complicated vs. simple, and overwhelming vs. manageable.<sup>1</sup> We discuss these attitude items in detail below.

We consider four groups of independent variables in the analysis of role attitudes: father's current family arrangements, characteristics of the ex-wife and children from that relationship, the father's social background, and father's involvement with nonresident children. Current family arrangements are indicated by a dichotomous variable coded 1 if the father is remarried or living with a female partner and 0 if he is single, and by four dichotomous variables describing the children who live in the father's household. Of these, three indicate the step and biological relationship between the father and children: only stepchildren in the household, step and biological children, and only biological children in the household. The omitted category is no children. We also identify cases in which the father lives with at least one boy, regardless of whether the child is a biological or stepson. Characteristics of the previous relationship include the number of children in the divorced family, the ex-wife's education at marriage (years completed), and a dummy variable indicating that the ex-wife has remarried (vs. not remarried or the father does not know her marital status). Father's background is measured by his education in years of schooling completed. Nonresident father's involvement with children is measured by: number of times the nonresident father and child visited each other in the previous year, annual amount of child support paid, and the number of extended visits (i.e., visits lasting longer than a weekend). For cases with missing data on child support payments and number of extended visits, we substitute the mean value for nonmissing cases and include dummy variables to identify cases with imputed values on these variables. The analysis also controls for the length of time that the nonresident father and children have been separated, distance between the nonresident father's household and where his children live, and whether the father is white (vs. nonwhite).

#### ANALYSIS STRATEGY

First, we compare the sample of nonresident fathers to the sample of resident mothers to evaluate the degree to which the former suffers from lower response rates. This stage of the analysis

defines a subsample of nonresident fathers that is comparable to a similarly defined subsample of resident mothers. We evaluate comparability based on demographic characteristics of the samples, such as whether the parents were married when the child was born, race, and parents' education. Information about demographic characteristics comes from self-reports as well as proxy reports, that is, resident mothers' reports about the children's nonresident father, and fathers' reports about the children's mother. We compare the distributions of these key variables across the two samples. Once we identify samples with similar distributions, we compare reports about paternal involvement for the restricted, similarly defined subsamples of nonresident fathers and resident mothers. We use logistic and ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to predict various aspects of involvement, controlling for family background and whether the respondent is the mother or father. These models include interactions of the independent variables by sex of respondent to determine whether conclusions about the factors that predict involvement depend on who the respondent is.

In the second stage of the analysis, we use the restricted subsample of nonresident fathers to describe their view of the father role, and to examine the association between family characteristics, including current level of involvement with children, and fathers' role evaluations. This stage has descriptive goals, in light of the severe limitations of using cross-sectional data to examine causal relationships between attitudes and behavior. We estimate two models for each of the role evaluations. The first estimates the association between family characteristics and role attitudes without taking into account nonresident fathers' contact with child and child support. The second includes nonresident fathers' involvement. We enter the involvement variables as a separate step because these variables define the context in which fathers conduct the activities of parenthood for children who live apart from them. Although the causal association between these activities and fathers' attitudes is ambiguous, the measures of child support and contact do describe behavior in the year prior to the survey in which the fathers report their attitudes. Despite the obvious qualifications required when using cross-sectional data to predict attitudes, we include this part of the analysis because the NSFH

data provide unique insight into attitudes about paternal responsibilities to children. Our analysis of this large, representative sample complements work on nonresident fathers that uses small, selective samples with in-depth interviews (e.g., Arendell, 1992; Haskins, 1988; Furstenberg et al., 1992). Both approaches further understanding of why some fathers participate in childrearing after separation and others do not.

## RESULTS

### NONRESIDENT FATHERS AND SURVEY PARTICIPATION

*Who are the nonresident fathers?* Table 1 shows selected characteristics of the parents and families represented by the two, unmatched samples of mothers and fathers. Mothers are those who report that they have a biological child under age 18 whose father is alive, but living in another household (n=1,503). Fathers are those who report that they have a biological or adopted child under 18 who is living with his or her mother in another household (n=482). As noted above, the child referent is randomly selected when more than one of the respondent's children lives apart from the other parent. The dramatic difference in unweighted numbers of cases occurs, in part, because the NSFH double-sampled single parents and those in stepfamily households. These conditions increase the number of resident mothers in the sample because they are, by definition, living as single parents or, if remarried, living with a stepfather to the random child. When the data are weighted to take account of unequal probabilities of sample selection due to oversampling, the numbers of cases are closer, but resident mothers still outnumber nonresident fathers by nearly 2 to 1, suggesting severe underrepresentation of nonresident fathers. Table 1 includes weighted statistics.<sup>2</sup> Sample sizes vary somewhat across horizontal panels of the table due to missing data on the characteristics of interest.

Other evidence in Table 1 is also consistent with underrepresentation of nonresident fathers in the NSFH sample. The first row shows that 52% of the resident mothers have randomly selected children who were born within marriage, compared to 62% for nonresident fathers. The second row in Table 1 shows that among respondents who reported about a child born in a marriage,

**Table 1**  
**Selected Characteristics of All Resident Mothers and Nonresident Fathers**

<b>Characteristic of:</b>	<b>Respondent is:</b>		<b>Statistical Significance</b>
	<b>Resident Mother</b>	<b>Nonresident Father</b>	
<b><u>Relationship</u></b>			
Child born in marriage	52.0% (1474)	62.0% (446)	**
Child born in first marriage, for marital births	87.6% ( 781)	86.0% (276)	n.s.
Race:			*
African American	30.4%	22.7%	
White	59.0	66.1	
Other	10.6	11.2	
	100 (1503)	100 (482)	
Mother is (re)married	22.7% (1503)	32.4% (426)	***
Father is (re)married	33.1% (1293)	40.9% (482)	*
Mother had more children	29.5% (1503)	22.6% (430)	*
Father had more children	28.2% (1269)	25.5% (482)	n.s.
<b><u>Child</u></b>			
Mean age (years)	8.7% (1503)	9.8% (482)	**
Child is a boy	51.2% (1481)	53.8% (481)	n.s.
<b><u>Legal Aspects of Separation</u></b>			
Legal agreement exists	55.4% (1498)	71.3% (462)	***
Child support award, for those with a legal agreement	91.6% ( 844)	90.6% (320)	n.s.
Parents have joint legal custody, for those with a legal agreement	19.1% ( 810)	29.6% (309)	**
<b><u>Relationship after Separation</u></b>			
Frequency of father's visits with child:			**
Not at all	29.1%	19.7%	
Once a year	11.2	8.0	
Several times a year	17.6	18.3	
1 to 3 times a month	15.6	21.6	
Once a week	12.1	16.7	
Several times a week	14.4	15.8	
	100 (1492)	100 (468)	

Table 1 (continued)

<b>Characteristic of:</b>	<b>Respondent is:</b>		<b>Statistical Significance</b>
	<b>Resident Mother</b>	<b>Nonresident Father</b>	
Father has extended visits, for those with any visits	28.6% ( 921)	43.4% (343)	***
Any child support paid/received in past year	45.8% (1420)	77.4% (425)	***
Mean monthly payment, if any	\$187 ( 610)	\$221 (288)	n.s.
Parents have conflict about the children	30.5% (1485)	42.5% (460)	***

Source: National Survey of Families and Households, Wave 1, 1987-88.

Notes: Statistics use weighted data. Unweighted number of cases in parentheses. Tests of statistical significance use weighted data to take account of double sampling for specific subgroups. Column totals may not equal 100% due to rounding error.

Symbols: \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*  $p \leq .05$



approximately equal percentages had that child in a first marriage.<sup>3</sup> That the sample of nonresident fathers includes a much higher percentage of men who report that the random child was born in a marriage is consistent with a number of other differences between the samples of mothers and fathers shown in Table 1. For instance, compared to whites, African Americans have higher rates of nonmarital childbearing, and the racial composition of the nonresident-father sample includes a lower percentage of African Americans compared to the mother sample. Differential representation of nonmarital relationships in the two samples is also consistent with the higher percentage of fathers who say that they have a legal agreement governing their separation from the children's mother.

Table 1 also shows self and proxy reports about each parent's current marital status and whether they have had additional children since the relationship with the child's other parent ended. Fathers are more likely to report that they and the children's mother are remarried, while mothers are slightly more likely to report that both parents had additional children. The table also shows sample differences on reports about legal aspects of the parents' separation, and their relationship after the separation.

The bottom part of the table shows that nonresident fathers report much more frequent contact with children than do mothers. Fathers are more likely to say they saw the random child last year, that they had extended visits lasting longer than a weekend, and that they paid child support. However, among those who report paying or receiving any child support, the difference in amounts of support paid/received is small, \$34 dollars a month more based on fathers' reports, and it is not statistically significant. Greater similarity between fathers' and mothers' reports conditional on having a legal agreement or paying support is consistent with Peterson and Nord's (1987) findings from the Survey of Income and Program Participation.

Table 1 shows that the samples of resident mothers and nonresident fathers in the NSFH are not comparable, in part because of differential rates of survey participation. To compare mothers' and fathers' experiences of separation and divorce requires samples with reasonably comparable response

rates. We therefore examine a subset of parents for whom response rates are likely to be more comparable than for the undifferentiated samples described in Table 1. We use information from Table 1 about parents' marital status when the referent child was born to identify more similar samples. Table 2 reports the characteristics of resident mothers and nonresident fathers who reported about a random child who was born in the respondent's first marriage. Table 2 includes more characteristics than Table 1 because for families of children born in marriage, the marriage and fertility histories provide information about time since separation, sibship size, and each spouse's education at first marriage.

Table 2 shows much greater similarity between the samples of resident mothers and nonresident fathers once we restrict attention to parents of children born in the respondent's first marriage. Mothers and fathers each report that they have been separated about 7 years (81.4 and 89.2 months, respectively). The racial composition of the samples and the family size (whether each parent had more children and number of children in the divorced family) are also very similar for the two samples. However, the percentage of fathers who report that their former wife is remarried is slightly greater than the percentage of resident mothers who are remarried (40.4% vs. 31.5%, respectively).

The data show substantial similarity between self and proxy reports about how much education the parent had completed at the time of first marriage. The only difference between resident mothers' reports about their schooling and nonresident fathers' reports about their ex-wife's schooling is that a slightly higher percentage of mothers report that they had not finished high school when they married. However, differences between the two samples in mothers' and fathers' education are not statistically significant. Parents' reports about how much education the child's father had when the parents were married are also similar for this subsample.

Resident mothers and nonresident fathers both report approximately equal distances between the child's household and that of the nonresident father. However, a much higher percentage of mothers say that they do not know where the other parent lives (7.8% vs. 0.7%, respectively).

**Table 2**  
**Characteristics of Resident Mothers and Nonresident Fathers of Random Children**  
**Born in First Marriages**

<b>Characteristic of:</b>	<b>Respondent is:</b>		<b>Statistical Significance</b>
	<b>Resident Mother</b>	<b>Nonresident Father</b>	
<b><u>Relationship</u></b>			
Separated < 12 months	8.4%	5.9%	n.s.
Mean duration of separation (months)	81.4 (681)	89.2 (232)	n.s.
<b><u>Individual Parent</u></b>			
Race: African American	13.3%	10.4%	n.s.
White	78.8	79.0	
Other	7.9	10.6	
	100 (681)	100 (232)	
Mother is remarried	31.5% (681)	40.4% (210)	*
Father is remarried	39.4% (625)	46.3% (232)	n.s.
Mother had more children	23.0% (681)	21.7% (214)	n.s.
Father had more children	26.0% (614)	23.8% (232)	n.s.
Mother's education at first marriage (years)			n.s.
<12	31.6%	24.3%	
12	43.8	56.4	
13-15	15.6	12.5	
16+	9.0	6.8	
	100 (568)	100 (227)	
Father's education at first marriage (years)			n.s.
<12	28.3%	30.9%	
12	47.5	45.9	
13-15	16.1	13.4	
16+	8.1	9.9	
	100 (656)	100 (176)	
<b><u>Child</u></b>			
Mean age (years)	10.6 (681)	11.2 (232)	n.s.
Child is a boy	49.6% (673)	55.3% (232)	n.s.
Mean number of minor children	1.6 (681)	1.6 (232)	n.s.

Table 2 (continued)

Characteristic of:	Respondent is:		Statistical Significance
	Resident Mother	Nonresident Father	
<u>Legal Aspects of Separation</u>			
Legal agreement exists	80.6% (679)	87.1% (221)	n.s.
Child support award, for those with a legal agreement	93.2% (545)	91.0% (186)	n.s.
Parents have joint legal custody, for those with a legal agreement	20.2% (521)	32.6% (180)	**
<u>Relationship after Separation</u>			
Mean distance apart (miles)	409 (632)	524 (225)	n.s.
R does not know location of former spouse	7.8% (678)	0.7% (226)	***
Frequency of father's visits with child:			
Not at all	18.7%	17.4%	n.s.
Once a year	12.8	7.7	
Several times a year	21.7	18.4	
1 to 3 times a month	22.7	24.0	
Once a week	12.8	16.8	
Several times a week	11.2	15.6	
	100 (677)	100 (222)	
Father has extended visits, for those with any visits	36.3% (476)	52.6% (171)	**
Number of extended visits, if any:			
1	32.1%	18.9%	n.s.
2	25.1	19.6	
3+	42.9	61.6	
	100 (167)	100 (88)	
Any child support paid/received in past year	63.8% (636)	85.8% (200)	***
Mean monthly payment, if any	\$222 (396)	\$265 (168)	n.s.
Parents have conflict about the children	35.8% (674)	44.6% (219)	n.s.
Mean number of topics of disagreement (0-6)	1.3 (674)	1.8 (219)	**

Source: National Survey of Families and Households, Wave 1, 1987-88.

Notes: Statistics use weighted data. Unweighted numbers of cases in parentheses. Tests of statistical significance use weighted data to take account of double sampling for specific subgroups. Column totals may not equal 100% due to rounding error.

Symbols: \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*  $p \leq .05$

Nonresident fathers may keep track of where their children live, even when they do not maintain contact with that child. Without paternal involvement, mothers lose track of where the father lives. Alternatively, this pattern may reflect a difference between the samples, rather than a reporting difference between mothers and fathers.

Table 2 also shows that for parents of children born in a first marriage, resident mothers and nonresident fathers report very similar levels of involvement. Nearly 81% of mothers and 87% of fathers say that they have a legal agreement about child support, visiting, or custody. Among those with a legal agreement, just over 90% of parents in both samples say that their agreement covers child support. Nonresident fathers are still more likely than mothers to report that they have joint legal custody of their children. Without a criterion, such as actual court documents describing the custody arrangement, it is impossible to determine whether this is a reporting difference which occurs because joint legal custody may be more salient to nonresident fathers, who see it as an indication of their commitment to children, or a difference due to sample selection (i.e., greater survey participation of involved fathers). Fathers' and mothers' reports about how frequently visits occur are similar, but about half of fathers say that their visits are extended stays compared to just over 36% of mothers. This pattern is mirrored in reports about child support. Nonresident fathers still are more likely to report that they paid child support than mothers are to say that they received child support (85.8% vs. 63.8%). That fathers may pay child support to a third party, such as the welfare agency or for health insurance, might explain some of the difference in parents' reports.<sup>4</sup> Among those who receive any payments, fathers report paying slightly more than mothers receive, but as in the previous table, the difference is not statistically significant at conventional levels. Finally, fathers report somewhat more areas of disagreement about postdivorce childrearing than do mothers.

The patterns in Table 2 and the contrast with the previous table suggest that restricting the sample to parents of children born in the first marriage reduces nonparticipation bias in estimates of levels of involvement based on nonresident fathers' reports. Although differences between resident

and nonresident parents' reports persist even in the restricted sample, many of the differences are consistent with the different knowledge and points of view held by resident mothers and nonresident fathers. Additional analyses not shown indicate that comparisons between parents of children born in any marriage, not just a first marriage, lead to conclusions which are generally similar to those based on Table 2. In the remainder of this paper, we restrict the analysis to children born in parents' first marriages, instead of children born in any marriage, because the NSFH data include information about first spouses' education. This enables us to incorporate both parents' education into analyses of fathers' involvement after separation and their attitudes about being a parent. Education is an important predictor of fathers' ability to pay child support (Seltzer, Schaeffer, & Charng, 1989) and of parents' attitudes about childrearing (Alwin, 1984).

*Does it matter whether fathers or mothers report?* We ask two questions about differences between resident mothers' and nonresident fathers' reports. First, do conclusions about the level of involvement depend on the reporter? Second, do data from resident mothers and nonresident fathers suggest different conclusions about the factors that predict involvement after divorce? On the first question, Table 2 suggests that even for explicitly defined subsamples where problems of nonparticipation bias are reduced, nonresident fathers report greater involvement on some aspects of postdivorce childrearing than do resident mothers. To address the second question, we estimated models predicting (1) whether the father paid any child support; (2) amount of support paid in the year; (3) whether he visited the child; (4) number of visits in the year; and, (5) whether there were any extended visits lasting longer than a weekend. Dichotomous outcomes were examined in logistic regressions, and amount of support and number of visits were examined in OLS regressions. Independent variables included those commonly used to predict paternal involvement after separation, including time separated, race, each parent's marital status and education, family size, whether the father had additional children, legal arrangements, and, for the contact outcomes, the random child's age and sex. We estimated fully pooled models, including an indicator of whether the respondent was

the mother or father and the interaction of this variable with all other independent variables.

Estimating the interactions did not significantly improve the fit of any of the models. However, mean differences between fathers and mothers persisted on all of these outcomes, except whether the father had any visits, when we controlled for main effects but excluded interactions.<sup>5</sup> We do not report the details of these analyses because of our null findings about sex differences in predictors of involvement and because the net mean differences generally replicate the zero-order associations reported in Table 2. We conclude that for the restricted sample of divorced parents whose children were born in the respondent's first marriage, the factors that predict variation in paternal involvement are the same whether mothers or fathers report about them.<sup>6</sup> However, resident mothers and nonresident fathers do differ in their reports of mean levels of important aspects of paternal involvement, even when other factors are taken into account.

#### WHAT DO NONRESIDENT FATHERS SAY ABOUT BEING A PARENT?

This stage of the analysis uses the sample of nonresident fathers of a random child born in the parents' first marriage to describe how fathers feel about their role. As noted above, respondents completed a self-administered questionnaire including responses to six semantic differentials characterizing their attitudes about parenting tasks. Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations of each item for this sample. The items have been recoded so that positive evaluations have higher scores. Note that Table 3 shows the role evaluations only for nonresident fathers for whom all of the parental role evaluations were completed in the self-administered questionnaire. This restriction reduces the initial sample size of 232 by 48 cases. Of these, most fathers either indicated that they were not parents or left all of these items blank but answered questions about other roles in the same series. To shed light on this missing data problem, we used information from another questionnaire sequence in which men were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement: "I often wish I could be free from the responsibility of being a parent." Nonresident fathers who did not complete the semantic differentials were more likely to want to be free of parental responsibilities.

**Table 3**  
**Means and Standard Deviations for Nonresident Fathers'**  
**Evaluation of their Parent Role**

Aspect of Role	All	Father Lives with Other Minor Children:	
		Yes	No
Interesting	5.79 (1.21)	5.83 (1.15)	5.75 (1.27)
Appreciated	5.62 (1.39)	5.61 (1.42)	5.63 (1.37)
Sociable	5.64 (1.50)	5.94* (1.26)	5.35* (1.65)
Well Done	5.71 (1.15)	5.79 (.98)	5.64 (1.29)
Simple	4.45 (1.61)	4.47 (1.67)	4.42 (1.56)
Manageable	5.03 (1.68)	4.80 (1.78)	5.27 (1.54)

Source: National Survey of Families and Households, Wave 1, 1987-88. Sample is nonresident fathers of a random child born in father's first marriage. Fathers must have completed the self-administered questionnaire and all role-related items.

Notes: Scores on role evaluations range from 1 to 7. Statistics and tests of statistical significance use weighted data. Unweighted number of cases is 184, 85 with other minor children, and 99 without other minor children in the household. Test of group difference: \*  $p \leq .05$



Thus, the role attitudes examined here describe the beliefs of nonresident fathers for whom the paternal role is more salient, and perhaps, more desirable.

Table 3 shows that nonresident fathers in this sample generally view their parenting activities as interesting, appreciated, sociable, and well done. Mean scores are somewhat lower for evaluations of how manageable and simple the activities are. As might be expected, nonresident fathers who also have biological and/or stepchildren in their household see parenting as more sociable than do fathers without children at home. Other differences by whether there are children in the household are small. Although the items are somewhat skewed toward the positive ends of the 1 to 7 scales, each variable includes a sufficient number of cases across values of the scale to use OLS regression for descriptive purposes.

To determine whether the individual role evaluations described a single underlying construct, we conducted a series of exploratory factor analyses using principal-components analysis and varimax rotation. The procedure suggests that the items produce two factors. The first factor reflected the degree to which fathers evaluated their parenting tasks as rewarding. The items, **interesting**, **appreciated**, **sociable**, and **well done**, had the highest loadings on this factor. The second factor was quite weak. As a result we constructed a summary index of the potential benefits of parenthood by summing responses to the four items that defined the first factor.<sup>7</sup> The index ranges in value from 10 to 28 with a mean of 22.8 and a standard deviation of 4.2 for the sample used in the attitudes analysis below. The alpha for this index is .81. This compares favorably to the reliability for a six-item index, .68. We treat the remaining items, evaluations of how simple and how manageable the parenting activities are, as single items.<sup>8</sup>

Table 4 reports OLS estimates for the associations between family characteristics and the summative index for the benefits of parenthood, and on the individual scales for how simple and how manageable parenting activities are. The analysis examines four groups of independent variables: current family arrangements, characteristics of nonresident children and their mother, father's social

**Table 4**  
**Selected Variables from OLS Estimates of Effects of Family Characteristics**  
**on Nonresident Fathers' Evaluation of their Parent Role**

	Dimension of Role					
	<u>Benefits Index</u>		<u>Simple</u>		<u>Manageable</u>	
	1	2	1	2	1	2
<u>Current Family Arrangements</u>						
Father remarried or cohabiting	-.018 (.913)	.080 (.936)	-.125 (.324)	-.136 (.338)	-1.46* (.325)	-1.50* (.341)
Only stepchildren in household <sup>a</sup>	.574 (1.36)	.598 (1.35)	.486 (.482)	.499 (.489)	1.16* (.483)	1.20* (.493)
Step and biological children <sup>a</sup>	2.53 (1.83)	2.24 (1.84)	-.631 (.650)	-.667 (.666)	2.95* (.651)	3.01* (.671)
Only biological children in household <sup>a</sup>	2.95* (1.21)	3.08* (1.21)	.381 (.432)	.389 (.436)	.677 (.432)	.689 (.440)
At least 1 boy in household	-2.53* (1.06)	-2.35* (1.08)	-.441 (.378)	-.435 (.390)	-.926* (.379)	-.964* (.393)
<u>Nonresident Children and Ex-Wife</u>						
Number of children in divorced family	.096 (.392)	.044 (.410)	.131 (.140)	.189 (.148)	-.100 (.140)	-.074 (.149)
Ex-wife's education (years) <sup>b</sup>	-.375† (.224)	-.299 (.232)	.132† (.080)	.156† (.084)	-.188* (.080)	-.178* (.084)
Ex-wife remarried	-.035 (.772)	-.063 (.783)	.042 (.275)	.029 (.283)	-.419 (.275)	-.403 (.285)
<u>Father's Background</u>						
Father's education (years)	.015 (.140)	-.021 (.144)	-.122* (.050)	-.122* (.052)	.002 (.050)	-.002 (.053)
<u>Involvement with Nonresident Children</u>						
Number of visits in past year (÷ by 100)	-	.767 (.678)	-	.044 (.245)	-	-.016 (.247)
Annual child support paid (÷ by 100)	-	.021 (.018)	-	-.005 (.006)	-	-.001 (.006)
Number of long visits in past year	-	.072 (.076)	-	-.005 (.027)	-	-.014 (.028)
Constant	27.8* (2.58)	26.5* (2.62)	4.65* (.919)	4.52* (.947)	8.18* (.920)	8.19* (.955)
R-squared	.123	.167	.120	.138	.227	.231
S.E.E.	4.30	4.26	1.53	1.54	1.53	1.55

Source: National Survey of Families and Households, 1987-88, Wave 1, nonresident fathers of random child born in parents' first marriage.

Notes: Benefits index is described in the text. Standard errors in parentheses. All models control for months separated, distance to children of divorce, and whether the father is white. Models with involvement variables include dummy variables to indicate missing data on child support payments and number of long visits. Data are unweighted (n=174).

†  $p \leq .10$  \*  $p \leq .05$

<sup>a</sup> Omitted category is no children in the household.

<sup>b</sup> Ex-wife's education is years of completed schooling at marriage, based on father's proxy report.

background, and his involvement with children from the previous marriage. The table shows two models for each dependent variable, one with and one without the measures of nonresident fathers' involvement with children after divorce. The factors included in our models explain only a small proportion of the variation in nonresident fathers' role evaluations. Nevertheless, our data show intriguing patterns. We evaluate statistical significance using a two-tailed test, because the implications of previous research, in general, do not suggest directional hypotheses. Because of the small number of cases in the sample, we also draw attention to associations that are statistically significant at  $p \leq .10$ . We discuss model 1 first.

Fathers who are remarried or cohabiting report that being a parent is less manageable than do fathers who are single. Fathers' remarriage is not associated with reports about the benefits of paternity or about how simple the tasks of parenthood are, although the sign for the latter coefficient is negative. Compared to not living with children, living with stepchildren only and living with both step and biological children increase fathers' reports of how manageable parenting is, perhaps because the father's new partner or wife takes more responsibility for the children when some are hers from a previous relationship. Fathers who live with biological children only also report greater benefits of being a parent than do those without children in their household. Including the three variables describing the step/biological composition of children explains a statistically significant proportion of variation in the benefits index and in the manageable item ( $F = 2.96, p \leq .05$  and  $F = 7.23, p \leq .01$ , respectively), but not for the simple item ( $F = 1.56$ ).<sup>9</sup> Fathers who live with either a step or biological son report fewer benefits of being a father and also find being a father less manageable, but the presence of a son is not associated with reports of how simple the tasks of parenthood are. In analyses not shown, we also find that whether there are preschool-age children in the household is not associated with nonresident fathers' role evaluations.

Characteristics of nonresident children and their mother, the father's ex-wife, are also associated with fathers' role evaluations. Ex-wife's education has a significant, negative association

with benefits that nonresident fathers perceive in the parent role. Mothers with more schooling may be more critical of men's performance as fathers or rely less on men during and after marriage. As a result, nonresident fathers whose ex-wives are highly educated may not evaluate their performance as fathers favorably either.<sup>10</sup> Compared to those whose ex-wives have less education, fathers whose ex-wives have more education see parenting activities as simpler but less manageable. Perhaps when fathers have less opportunity to supervise their children or to organize their children's schedules, their activities as fathers are simple, but difficult to manage psychologically because of the lack of control. Neither the number of children in the divorced family nor the age and sex of the random child referred to in the fathers' reports about visits affect his role evaluations. (Tables for age and sex of child not shown.)

Father's own education is negatively associated with how simple they think parenting is, but not with the perceived benefits of these activities or with how manageable they are. Compared to those with less education, fathers with more education may think that childrearing is complicated because they are influenced by theories of child development and the advice of childrearing experts. That father's education does not affect reports about how manageable parenting is may occur because educated fathers are better equipped to manage the responsibilities of being a parent than less educated fathers, but those with more education may face greater demands for balancing paid work and family obligations.

With a minor exception, none of the coefficients for the variables described above changes appreciably when the nonresident fathers' child support and visits with children are entered into the analysis. (See model 2.) Only the coefficient for the effect of ex-wife's education on the benefits index declines in magnitude and loses statistical significance. The results show that taking account of fathers' involvement with nonresident children does not affect fathers' evaluations of the benefits of parenting activities, or how simple or manageable these activities are. The absence of association between any of the measures of paternal involvement and nonresident father's attitudes may result

from respondents interpreting the items as asking questions about tasks they do for children who live with them rather than for their nonresident children. We also examined the association between fathers' attitudes and conflict with the resident mother. Conflict is not associated with perceptions of the benefits of being a parent or how manageable parenting tasks are. However, when conflict is higher, fathers are less likely to think that parenthood is simple (not shown).

### **SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION**

Our findings show that the NSFH, an important national study of U.S. adults, underrepresents nonresident fathers. This is consistent with findings from other large national data sources. Difficulties of locating and interviewing nonresident fathers lead to high nonresponse rates for this important population. Recent efforts to reform the child support system are informed by social research which relies on resident mothers' reports and highly selected samples of nonresident fathers. To develop more effective policies and to address the concerns of all nonresident fathers and their children requires information about the characteristics of more representative samples. We compare nonresident fathers' and resident mothers' reports about their relationship, demographic characteristics, and the fathers' involvement with children after separation to identify a subsample of fathers for which nonparticipation biases are smaller.

We find that when we restrict attention to nonresident fathers and resident mothers who report about fathers' contact with a child who was born in the respondent's first marriage, parents describe their own and the other parents' characteristics much more similarly. A few differences persist, but most are not statistically significant at conventional levels. However, nonresident fathers still report somewhat higher levels of involvement with children after divorce than do mothers. This may occur because fathers have greater knowledge about how much child support they pay or because the time they spend visiting children is more salient to them than it is to resident mothers. Nevertheless, for some aspects of paternal involvement, nonresident fathers' and resident mothers' reports are quite similar. Also, the family and individual characteristics that predict fathers' involvement are the same

whether they are based on mothers' or fathers' reports. This suggests that other national samples which also underrepresent nonresident fathers may still be useful for studying paternal involvement in childrearing after separation if analyses are restricted to samples of families separated by divorce.

We used the restricted subsample of fathers to examine attitudes about being a parent. Even in this sample of men who identified themselves as nonresident fathers, a significant minority did not respond to questions about being a parent. Nonresident fathers who skipped these items were more likely to report that they felt burdened by the responsibilities of parenthood. Among men who completed the role evaluations, most described their parenting activities positively. Characteristics of the children with whom the nonresident father lives have important effects on attitudes about being a parent. Living with other biological children increases fathers' perceptions of the benefits of paternity, and those who live with at least one stepchild report that parenting is more manageable, perhaps because there are clearer rules about fathers' responsibilities for children who live with them than for nonresident children. Our findings about the greater importance of co-resident children than nonresident children for fathers' attitudes about parenthood support views of contemporary fatherhood which emphasize its sequential nature (Furstenberg, 1988; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988).

Our results also reinforce the view that women orchestrate men's relationships with children. We find that nonresident fathers' remarriage or cohabitation decreases fathers' reports about how manageable it is to be a parent. The ex-wife's (resident mother's) education also affects nonresident fathers' attitudes about being a parent. When mothers are more highly educated, fathers report that being a parent is simpler, but mothers' education has a negative effect on reports about the benefits of paternity. The resident mother's education and having a new partner are more important predictors of nonresident fathers' role evaluations than his contributions to child support and the time he spends with his divorced children, neither of which were associated with the attitudes examined here.

The finding that mothers and stepmothers are important for understanding men's experience with the father role is paradoxical, given our emphasis in this paper on identifying a reasonably

representative sample of nonresident fathers who can speak for themselves about parenthood. When parents live together, mothers have power to direct men's interactions with their children (Backett, 1987). Women's control over children is much more pronounced when fathers and children live apart. Mothers control younger children's schedules and construct guidelines within which nonresident fathers may spend time with the children. Nonresident fathers have some autonomy when they are actually with their children, and those without a new wife or new partner gain experience in childrearing without a female moderator. Experience may enhance fathers' ability to pursue an independent relationship with children, but these efforts may be circumscribed by mothers who prefer to avoid their former spouse or who are busy juggling the demands of paid employment and family responsibilities. Understanding how separated parents negotiate childrearing and learning what arrangements are better for children are critical tasks for future research. Our findings point to the importance of examining these issues with data from well-defined samples of both mothers and fathers and to the difficulty of pursuing these questions when some nonresident fathers manage childrearing by disengagement.

## NOTES

1. We treat all of these items as bipolar. Assuming that the items are bipolar is reasonable for such items as poorly done vs. well done, but to some respondents the contrast between other endpoints on the semantic differentials (e.g., overwhelming vs. manageable), may not represent direct opposites. Differences in the degree to which each semantic differential is bipolar may explain discrepancies between results for items that one might otherwise expect to reflect a similar underlying construct (e.g., manageable and simple).
2. Tests of group differences use weighted data and the weighted number of cases normalized to sample size for evaluating statistical significance. Weighted sample sizes are 690 and 393 for resident mothers and nonresident fathers, respectively.
3. The designation of parents' marital status at the random child's birth reflects the respondent's reports about his or her own marriage and fertility. We cannot take into account whether the child was born in the first marriage of both parents because the data are not from matched parents in the same family.
4. Nonresident parents have been required since 1975 to pay child support to state welfare agencies when their children receive AFDC (Garfinkel, 1992).
5. The net difference between mothers and fathers on whether the father had any visits extending longer than a weekend was in the expected direction but only marginally significant ( $t = 1.82, p \leq .10$ ).
6. We also estimated interaction models predicting these five aspects of paternal involvement for the unrestricted sample of all resident and nonresident parents (as shown in Table 1). These models include fewer independent variables than are available for parents of children born in first marriages. For the dichotomous outcome of whether or not the father visits the child, we find that the factors predicting involvement depend on the sex of the respondent. For other aspects of involvement, including the interaction terms does not significantly improve the fit of the model. Tables available on



request.

7. The correlation between this equal-weights index and one which uses factor weights is .99.

8. We investigated whether to combine these items as a second summative index, but the low reliability of the index, .18, precluded this strategy. Results of the exploratory factor analyses are similar for weighted and unweighted data and for varying definitions of the sample of nonresident fathers.

9. Taking into account whether the father lives with at least one child from a previous relationship (i.e., whether he has physical custody of a child) does not improve the fit of the model for any of the three dependent variables. (Results not shown.)

10. Ihinger-Tallman, Pasley, and Buehler (1993) point to the importance of former and current wives as significant others who influence fathers' identity after divorce.

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