

# Communicating with Parents about Child Support

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# Background

- **Research questions:**
  - What are parents' views on non-resident fatherhood and single motherhood?
  - What are parents' views on child support?
  - What challenges do non-intact parents face?
  - What services do they believe would help their families?
- **Method:**
  - In fall 2013, OER conducted three focus groups: two with custodial parents and one with noncustodial parents.

# Focus Groups

PROGRAM	TARGET GROUP	
	Custodial Parents	Non-Custodial Parents
Parenting Programs	✓	✓
Employment Program	✓	—

# Focus Groups

Demographics		Non Custodial Parents (n=10)	Custodial Parents (n=10)
Gender	Male	10	n/a
	Female	n/a	10
Age	Mean	29 years	30 years
	Median	29 years	27 years
Education	Less than High School	2	2
	High School Diploma/GED	6	4
	Some college or more	1	4
	License/trade only	1	0
Work Status	Unemployed	6	7

# Fathers' Views of Nonresident Fatherhood

- “I try to be there as much as possible for my three daughters.”
- “My 6 year old lives far away but we talk frequently by phone.”
- “My child is 3 weeks old, I see her everyday.”
- “The mother married another man and they moved to Atlanta so I don’t get to see my child.”
- “I see one child frequently, but it is controversial to see the other two.” (Based on different relationships with the children’s mothers.)

# Mothers' Views of Single Motherhood

- “I have three children, the oldest is 3 and the youngest is 2 months old. My mother helps out. The children’s dad doesn’t help. He’s a liar.”
- “My parents were married for 35 years, but I’m starting a cycle—that statistic of being a single mom. I didn’t think it would happen to me.... It’s definitely a challenge knowing I will be raising a child by myself for the next 21 years.”
- “His father is still in my life and it’s going okay, but it was much better before the pregnancy.... Going through a little right now, but in due time that will be fixed.”
- “I live with my mother. I cry because my baby’s father is not involved enough.”
  - But relationship status is still in flux—she later explained that they’re talking about moving in together.

# Fathers' Challenges



## Economic Woes

- “I supported everyone when I worked. Now I don’t work and it’s stressful.”
- “Me and my baby mama clashed because I was getting money on the streets and she wasn’t good with that.”

## Limited Access

- “My child lives far away.”
- “The mother of my child is crazy and won’t let me see our child.”
- “She says you can’t see her unless you have a functioning phone.”

## Mothers Turning Child Against Him

- “Mother will brainwash the kid.”
- “The children never know the real story when they grow up—they just hate their Dad.”

## Lack of Financial Stewardship by Mothers

- “Baby looking raggedy, but the mother has Chanel and her nails done.”
- “The money is being used to buy the next man’s sneakers.”

# Mothers' Challenges



## Lack of Trust

- “He’s a liar—I just found out how old his is.”
- “He got me pregnant and then got another girl pregnant.”

## Lack of Father Buy-In

- “He won’t claim her. When he sees her he refers to himself as Uncle Bliz.”
- “I tell the father ‘You’re going to miss out on so much.’ He says ‘You’re right.’ Always says the right thing but then he doesn’t do it.”
- “They take it out on the kids if you don’t want a relationship with them.”

## Better No Father than an Inconsistent Father

- “He has tried to make amends and build a relationship with my son, but the damage is done.”
- “If you’re not going to be 100%, don’t be nothing.”
- “Easier to have the father out of your life than negotiate for him to act right.”
- “Why do you have [the baby’s] pictures all over your Facebook, if you don’t send any money?”

# How Mother-Father Relationships Affect the Children

## ***Fathers...***

- Poor lifetime relationship with children—children traumatized by their mothers and blame their fathers.
- Others spoke of close relationships despite physical distance: “We bond, we talk on the phone.”

## ***Mothers...***

- Children are fine—“can’t miss what they’ve never had.”
- Others spoke of steep emotional toll—“My son cries every day for his dad.”
- Father doesn’t want to be involved with the child unless mother is part of the package: He stepped out our child’s life because we’re not together.”



# Fathers on Child Support

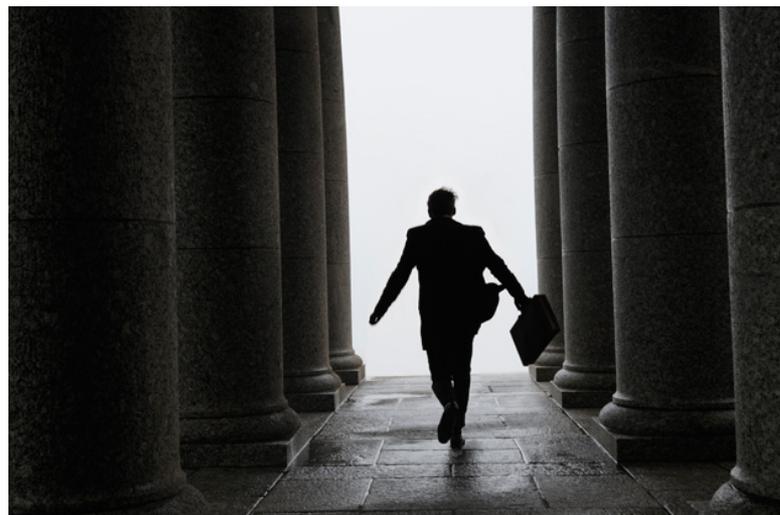
1. Fathers described child support as **punitive, disempowering, a weapon** used by women, whom the system favors.

Reaction to the word “child support”?

**RUN!**

“We hustle the streets. Mothers hustle the courts.”

“Females put Dad on child support because they want to make his life hell. They see him with another female, so they put him on child support.”



# Fathers on Child Support (cont.)

## 2. Fathers questioned **mothers' use of the money.**

- Fathers concerned the mothers don't spend child support on the children; some suggested the courts should monitor mothers' use of the dollars.

*"Baby looking raggedy, but the mother has Chanel and her nails done."*

*"The money is being used to buy the next man's sneakers."*

*"It's Baby Mama Support."*

- Fathers described the mothers as lazy, depending on cash assistance and child support instead of going to work.

Mothers put their *"feet up on the couch"* instead of looking for a job

# Fathers on Child Support (cont.)

3. Fathers complained that being a father is about spending time with their children—**it's not just about money**. Moreover, even if they pay, they may not be able to see their child.
  - *“Child support ain't being a father; it's being there for them. Money can't teach a boy to be a man.”*
  - *“It's harder for men to get visitation than for women to get child support.”*
  - Several of the men described how hard it is for men to get custody of the children, only if the father has a clean record.

# Mothers on Child Support

1. Universal preference for “**voluntary**” informal support. In the absence of informal support, most preferred to “**do it on my own**”—often with support from family.
  - If you have to force him to be a father, I don’t want his money.  
*“I know a lot of successful people raised by a single mother... Better off letting God deal with them than trying to chase them for child support.”*
  - Their children already have support from extended family members.  
*“My family helps out and my son never needs nothing.”*

# Mothers on Child Support (cont.)

2. Another significant concern is that if the father is forced to pay, he will **demand more access** to the child.



- *“I thought about going to child support, but he’s evil. I don’t want to deal with him. And my daughter is older so she doesn’t need so much.”*
- *“The reason I didn’t put my baby’s father on child support is because I don’t want him to have no rights to my child’s life.”*

# Mothers on Child Support (cont.)

3. Many mothers questioned **the payoff** of turning to the child support program.
  - Mothers don't believe they'll receive substantial support.

*"They put a warrant out for his arrest and collected \$7 and sent it to me.... What am I going to do with \$7? So I didn't bother to file for the other two."*
  - One explained that she tried with the father of her first child, but the state never found him.
  - The process is too burdensome.

*"I was going to file for child support. I went to court three times... Every time I went to court I saw all these women who were always in court" trying to enforce their orders.*

# Mothers on Child Support (cont.)

4. Finally, mothers **do not want a formal order** if:
  - a) the father is paying informal support,
  - b) the relationship is good but he can't pay, **or**
  - c) the mother is still holding out hope for a good relationship.
  
5. On the other hand, women acknowledged that the system can be helpful when the father has **run out of chances...**

One mother explained that she was seeking child support from the father of her first child because he has treated her and her daughter so badly:  
*"If he goes to jail, I don't care. If it messes his life up, I don't care. And if he gets married, his wife will be in debt too and I don't care."*

# Preferred Services and Activities

