Fatherhood is “in.” Even in the polarized political world of the past decade there is some convergence between the thrust of President Bush’s support of a five year federal initiative on “responsible fatherhood” and President Obama’s plea for fathers’ increased involvement in their children’s lives. Implicit in the new emphasis on promoting father involvement are assumptions that men lack the motivation to play an active role as father and must be persuaded to do so.

In our view, these assumptions miss the mark. In 30 years of working with families, and more recently in our California-based preventive intervention program to encourage father involvement in low-income families, we have not found fathers to be unmotivated or uninterested in being engaged parents. Rather, fathers tell us that they want to be more involved with their children than their fathers were with them, but there are serious barriers to doing so.

Obstacles to involved fatherhood exist within the culture as a whole, government child support programs, the fields of social science research, family service agencies, public and private workplaces, and the dynamics of family relationships. Our goal here is to describe examples of barriers in each of these institutions, and to provide suggestions about how social scientists, policymakers, family service providers, employers, health care providers, and parents themselves might contribute to overcoming the barriers to fathers’ involvement in child rearing. We are not arguing that children require a father’s involvement to grow up healthy, but rather that a body of substantial evidence underscores the fact that in addition to mothers’ care, the involvement of a second positive parent or paternal figure enhances children’s development.

Institutional Barriers
1. Culturally-based gender-role stereotypes

Across many subgroups in American culture, there continues to be a strong belief that direct hands-on care of children is what...
mothers do, although some fathers are encouraged to be the “disciplinarian.” Because violations of traditional father roles often lead to questioning and teasing by grandparents and peers, the stereotype limits men’s natural choices about being the kind of fathers they want to be.

2. Government child support programs
Many government programs define father involvement in terms of financial contributions to the family (e.g., child support). Men sometimes referred to as “deadbeat dads” often lack the resources to pay what the state has mandated, but lack of payment often lowers the possibility of more direct involvement. Punitive regulations that interfere with the establishment of a more personal psychological bond between fathers and children punish both the children and the fathers.

3. Social science research
If we measured paternal importance by the amount of research and scholarly writing on fathers in the social science literature, the inevitable conclusion would be that fathers are relatively unimportant in children’s development. The 1965 Handbook of Child Development, edited by Paul Mussen, contained articles on every topic in child development being investigated at that time: the word “father” was not in the index. Although studies of fathers in the social science literature have increased more recently, parenting studies continue to focus predominantly on mothers. The fact that fathers can be difficult to recruit and maintain as study participants is used as a reason for not including them. Most investigations simply miss the idea that the combination of both parents’ styles may be a key to explaining variations in children’s adaptation.

4. The workplace
Despite recent attention being paid to the demands of balancing work and family, it is the case that most men have restricted choices about where to work and most jobs are set up with specified times in which the worker must be in the workplace, which limits the time men can spend with their children. Even when there are “family-friendly policies,” fathers are less likely than mothers to take advantage of them or to choose jobs with flexible work arrangements more compatible with an active parenting role.

5. Family service agencies
The Supporting Father Involvement study, sponsored by the Office of Child Abuse Prevention in the California Department of Social Services and developed by the four authors of this piece is located in Family Resource Centers (FRCs) in five counties. Early on, we were confronted by a surprising absence of welcoming messages for fathers at the FRCs. The physical environment was oriented exclusively to women (pictures on the walls, magazines, female staff). Standard agency practices did not send the message that men were welcome. Often only the mother’s name was on the case files, even when she was married to the child’s father. When home visitors phoned or knocked on the family’s door, they asked to speak to the mother about their child. Hours of operation and classes or programs were almost always during daytime hours when most fathers are at work. The fact that some of the female clientele were victims of domestic violence or had partners who abused the child has often led to an overall wariness and distrust of male partners by female staff. Finally, staff did not receive training in recognizing these barriers to men’s family involvement or help to consider their frame of reference. Father-friendly family agencies are rare, both in this country and abroad.

6. Within family relationships: focus on the co-parents
One of the most powerful barriers to active father involvement lies in the dynamics of the relationship between parents. Mothers often act as gatekeepers who regulate the frequency, intensity, and quality of fathers’ engagement with their children. The concept of gatekeeping becomes even more central when parents divorce or when the biological father ceases to be the mother’s romantic partner. Legal contests about the designation of a custodial parent often rest on the mother’s view of the father’s competence or knowledge of the child’s needs rather than on direct assessments of the fathers’ ability to function as an adequate parent.

The larger point here is that the quality of the relationship between the parent is a central ingredient in whether and how fathers become involved with their children. Results of many recent correlational studies indicate that when the relationship between the parents is going well, fathers are more likely to be involved in caring for their children—with resulting benefits accruing to the children, mothers, and fathers themselves.

In addition to their separate effects on discouraging father involvement, barriers operate cumulatively. Cultural stereotypes, government programs, the relative absence of support by social scientists, the lack of receptivity in family service agencies, and unresolved conflict in the relationship between parents combine to present substantial barriers to men who want to take an active role as parents.

Pathways toward overcoming barriers
General principles
Our specific suggestions about how to overcome, or at least reduce, barriers to father involvement begin with an assumption that change can take place if people in institutions are helped to modify their perspective on the potential positive role of fathers in their children’s development. Helping staff recognize how their current attitudes and behaviors—often unintentional—contribute to fathers’ absence or distance from their children’s lives prompts them to become more conscious of the messages they may be projecting to families. Such shifts make increased choice about sharing child care possible for mothers and fathers. Finally, we believe that institutional change is unlikely to result from a single workshop, memo, or article (like this one) touting the advantages of father involvement. Institutional change.
Mythologizing Fatherhood

by Ralph LaRossa, Ph.D., Professor, Georgia State University, rlarossa@gsu.edu

Mythologies matter. To believe something is true, when it is not, can have significant consequences. We know this. As educators, we spend a good part of our professional lives talking and writing about mythologies, and—if we feel it is important to do so—trying to dispel them.

As someone who researches the history of fatherhood, I have committed a fair amount of time and energy to thinking about yesterday’s dads and the mythologies that often are crafted about them. With each new project, I learn a bit more. With each new project, I become more keenly aware of both the differing and the distorted views of the men (and women) who came before.

In an earlier project, I examined the culture and conduct of fatherhood from the early 1900s to the beginning of the Second World War. In a current project, I am studying fatherhood in the 1950s and am trying to get a sense of how involved fathers were with their kids back then. The work has been a journey of sorts for me, because I was a youngster in the 1950s, and am part of the cultural and behavioral fabric I now endeavor to understand.

The curious thing about fathers in the 1950s is that these men continue to grab people’s attention, especially when it comes to fatherhood. Fathers in the 1950s often are used as the benchmark against which to measure fathers today.

Much of what I am finding, as it turns out, does not square with what I once thought was true; nor does it mesh neatly with the standard historical references on the era. I also have come to realize more than I did before how often fathers in the 1950s are portrayed in stereotypical terms. Though there are exceptions, fathers in the 1950s routinely are depicted as men who had virtually no meaningful contact with their children. Consider, for example, the following accounts:

When men gather to discuss common concerns, they return insistently to the emotional abyss so many feel separates them from their male parents. “Father hunger” is what some call this feeling. Much attention is currently being paid to the topic of preoccupied fathers and neglected sons. One man spoke for many when he said of his childhood: “My father would come home, tired, he gave it all at the office. He had nothing left at home (Ralph Keyes [ed.], Sons on Fathers, 1992).

What does it mean to be a father? Men of our parents’ generation gave this question little serious consideration . . . . No matter what their background, it seems that fathers of the fifties and sixties were away for so many hours during the day that their presence around the house was experienced as a treat, more like a favorite uncle coming to visit than an ongoing participation . . . . Dad was away at work too often for us to be able to talk with him about everyday life (Jonathan W. Gould and Robert E. Gunther, Reinventing Fatherhood, 1993).

My father’s generation often said, sadly, they just didn’t have a clue how to be a father. They didn’t know how to hug, to be there, even to talk because their fathers never did it with them (Nancy Evans, Family Life, 1994).

The men of my father’s generation didn’t consciously consider that they were missing anything by being less than present in the lives of their children (Travis Grant, About.com, 2000).

Dads used to come home from work, read the paper in silence and speak to children only when they were prepared to talk about subjects like sports, internal-combustion engines, the military and geopolitics (Douglas Brown, Denver Post, 2006).

Do these statements qualify as myths? What actually is a myth? The anthropologist Bradd Shore, whose book, Culture in Mind: Cognition, Culture, and the Problem of Meaning (1996), provides a detailed description of the social nature of people’s thoughts, and offers an interesting take on the subject. He refers to myths as paradoxical narratives. “Myths are not simply lies,” he says “and they are also not simply truths. Myths are special kinds of stories, stories which always frame something that is arguably true along with something that is arguably not true. It’s a particular mix of fact and fiction.”

How can this definition of myths be applied to the stories being told about fatherhood in the 1950s? First, we would acknowledge that there is some truth to the narratives. That truth may include references to fathers who commuted between home and work and were available to their children on weekdays primarily in the early morning or early evening (assuming their work hours were during the day). The first two narratives include this element. Another truth may be that the particular person telling the story did indeed have a father who tended to ignore him or her. Why, Mythologizing Fatherhood continued on page F4
without hesitation, would we doubt the son who reported that his father was too exhausted at the end of the day to ‘give’ at home? There were—and are—any number of fathers (and mothers) who work long and arduous hours, sometimes at two or three jobs, and who feel worn out after their shifts.

And the fiction? Well, the fiction comes in when the narrators employ hyperbole and overgeneralization—often for dramatic effect—to condemn an entire generation of fathers. Lost in the naïve stories about fathers in the 1950s is the fact that fatherhood is plural and multifaceted. Yesterday’s dads were not a monolithic entity (any more than today’s fathers are), but a mosaic with significant differences among them, based on individual personality as well as class, race, ethnicity, age, etc. I mean, how seriously should we take the assertion that the postwar generation of fathers “didn’t have a clue how to be a father” and “didn’t even know how to hug”? What about the claim that these men “didn’t consciously consider that they were missing anything by being less than present in the lives of their children”? Didn’t consciously consider? Ever?

Needless to say, separating fact from fiction is a challenge—and, for some, an epistemologically meaningless exercise. But if it is believed that researchers can, and should, carefully piece together information to provide a reasonably accurate picture of things, then it is important to ask, to what extent do these stories of fathers in the 1950s empirically hold up?

My read of the historical evidence is that the stories fall short. Although it is correct to say that, on an aggregate level, fathers in the postwar era did less child care and especially less infant care than did mothers, it is incorrect to say that, by and large, because of their work schedules, fathers had absolutely no time to devote to their children; or that, when they did have time, they were clueless as to how to interact. Let me add, too, there is ample evidence to indicate that a number of fathers in the postwar era—as well as before—regularly changed diapers, got up for 2 a.m. feedings, rocked and burped children, and administered to sick babies. In at least one instance among the narratives, the narrator mentioned that a number of fathers in the postwar era might not be present at all because of their work schedules, but a number of fathers did spend time with their children.

break or bend the stereotypic father mold, if they choose to do so. In our father involvement study, we have found hundreds of Mexican American, African American, and European American fathers who are eager to become involved with their children, but uncertain how to make that happen. We offer opportunities for small groups of parents, led by trained clinicians, to explore their points of view with others in similar life situations. Our evidence shows that especially when the groups are composed of couples (rather than fathers), the relationship between the parenting partners improves, fathers become more involved as parents in positive ways—and children reap the benefits in their cognitive, social, and emotional development.

To summarize, we are arguing that men’s engagement in the daily lives of their children is more a matter of helping them overcome institutional barriers than persuading them to become motivated to be “responsible fathers.” Recognizing the state of the American economy at this time, we are not advocating universal interventions directed to families, organizations or the culture at large. We are suggesting that reframing father involvement as a challenge facing significant institutional barriers rather than motivational deficits is more likely to have benefits for fathers, for mothers, and for their children.
An Expanded Vision of Fathering and Youth Work

by William Marsiglio, Professor of Sociology, University of Florida, marsig@ufl.edu

Although the multilayered cultural narrative of American fathering is slowly evolving in progressive ways, the word “fathering,” for too many, still signals notions of paternity, breadwinning, or something nebulous about “being there.” “Mothering,” on the other hand, more readily conjures up sentiments tied to nurturance, caregiving—the core stuff of relationships. These gendered messages, transmitted via public and private discourses, shape social policy, how others see fathers, how fathers perceive themselves, and how fathers relate to children.

During the past several decades, policymakers, social activists, community-based professionals, academics, and others have tried to frame public discourse to accommodate their respective image of “responsible fatherhood.” It is well-chronicled that much of this activity has accentuated two contrasting faces of contemporary fatherhood—the “nurturing father” and the “deadbeat dad.” Active in this debate for years, I now lobby in my book, Men on a Mission, for a much broader perspective on fathering and men’s relations to children.

Beyond reframing potent words like fathering and mothering, much can be gained by transforming the cultural landscape and practice of fathering—good fathering in particular—to include an ethic of community investment, most notably, spending quality time with youth. This expanded vision demands that men and others appreciate the vital overlap between men’s potential contributions to their own children at home and unrelated youth in public settings. Such a vision should engender ethical and political appeal in a society with millions of at-risk youths.

My interviews with a racially-diverse sample of 55 male youth workers (e.g., coaches, teachers, youth ministers, probation officers, Big Brothers, Boys & Girls Club staff, 4-H agents, Boy Scout leaders, camp counselors) aged 18-65 reveal that fathers can articulate how their youth work and fathering are linked—especially once they are asked to ponder the possibilities. The men typically stress how time with kids in public settings has enabled them to become more focused, attentive, patient, discerning, confident, caring, and approachable fathers. Throughout their lives, the youth workers interacted with kids in varied settings, enhancing their chances of acquiring a wide range of skills and insights that helped them at home with their children and in subsequent youth work. Although most highlight positive outcomes, several mention how the ill-effects of working with disruptive and emotionally demanding kids sometimes disrupt their family lives. My participants also observe that their experience as fathers has enabled them to: a) become more sensitive to and accepting of kids’ emotional well-being and varied personalities, b) grow more comfortable talking to kids, c) learn how to predict and manage kids’ behavior, and d) become more attentive to kids’ family circumstances and the roles that parents play. Experiencing the joys and struggles of fathering firsthand, then, provides men a unique window to understand and empathize with other kids and their parents.

In recent centuries, representations of manhood and fathering are more apt to be anchored in individualistic, family-centered accomplishments, but men’s contributions to the good of the community were once instrumental in determining their social status and moral standing. Ideally, in the new millennium, men’s productive involvement in youth work should summon similar public appreciation. Even though volunteering might evoke special moral recognition, doing paid youth work in areas plagued by low wages and little social status—such as early childhood education and child care—warrants public applause. That only three percent of childcare workers and nine percent of elementary school teachers in the United States are male reminds us that the gendered division of labor impedes youngsters’ chances to see men engaged in nurturing activity in formal work settings.

A related way to expand the scope of fathering, and to extend our thinking beyond the one-on-one father-child template, is to inspire more collective fathering in diverse contexts. Whether in the inner city or prison where a fathering program can create a place for nonresident fathers to support one another while discovering healthy ways to relate to their children, or in a school where fathers are persuaded to participate in an afterschool program, or in a neighborhood where fathers establish an informal weekly gathering to supervise kids doing organized play in a park, men can pursue creative outlets that foster their mutual commitment to care for kids in meaningful ways. Granted, a united spirit involving women/mothers as well as men/fathers can benefit many men (and youth) as well, but children may thrive in unique ways when men hold other men directly accountable for their commitment to help youth.

The seeds for collective fathering extend beyond biological or legal ties. They can be found in social fathering and men’s generativity toward youth in general. Even though parents typically provide their children unique resources, youth also benefit when...
the files I have been poring over, it was the father who taught the mother how to care for the baby, rather than vice versa. Granted, the vast majority of fathers viewed their involvement as “helping” mothers (the division of routine child care was decidedly unequal), but their help was not necessarily as inconsequential or as optional as some have suggested.

What is especially remarkable about the hyperbolic accounts is that they are recurrent. Although the five I refer to above were all published fairly recently, similar kinds of accounts can be found in every decade over the past 100 years. Children, but especially sons from what I’ve been able to gather, repeatedly have told stories of how yesterday’s dads (not just their dads, but all dads) were totally uninvolved.

What is also interesting is that how often hyperbolic stories of fathers in the past serve as a prologue to other stories—namely stories of how a son and the generation of fathers he belongs to—are, or will be, entirely different. The major message seems to be (quoting from a Parents’ Magazine article in the 1930s) that “The old type of father is passing!”

Which brings us back to the question, what purpose do myths serve? Social psychologists tell us that all stories, including myths, are intricately tied to the politics of identity. Stories, as such, are inseparable from who we think we are, or would like to be.

The linkage between storytelling and identity formation can be conceptually examined in a variety of ways. One approach is to rely on a synthesis of symbolic interactionism and social constructionism. Drawing on the work of cognitive sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, we may view the production of stories/myths as an effort to create “islands of meaning.” Here is how Zerubavel describes the process in his book, The Fine Line: Making Distinctions in Everyday Life (1991). “Creating islands of meaning,” he says, “entails two rather different mental processes—lumping and splitting. On the one hand, it involves grouping ‘similar’ items together in a single mental cluster—sculptors and filmmakers (‘artists’), murder and arson (‘felonies’), foxes and camels (‘animals’). At the same time, it also involves separating in our mind ‘different’ mental clusters from one another—artists from scientists, felonies from misdemeanors, animals from humans. . . . Separating one island of meaning from another entails the introduction of some mental void between them.”

Stories about fathers in the past generally employ both lumping and splitting. Certain fathers are lumped into one category, so as to distinguish them from other fathers who are lumped into another category. (The fathers grouped in category A are deemed similar to one another, but dissimilar from the fathers grouped in category B.) Myths about fathers in the 1950s thus are a combination of two stories. One story is about how fathers in the 1950s were all alike, in that they were not very involved with their children. The other story is about how the current generation of fathers, typically the generation that the narrator belongs to, is different from previous generations. Implicit is the assertion that fathers in the narrator’s generation also are all alike, only in the contemporaneous case the fathers are said to be intimately involved with their kids.

What is the point of these stories? Putting aside for the moment whether they are true or not (and they cannot be altogether true, because each group of fathers is stereotypically depicted as a homogenous set), the stories are identity aggrandizing. The current generation of fathers is said to be not just completely different from previous generations, but also infinitely better. belittling yesterday’s dads—across the board—super-inflates the egos of, and mythologizes, today’s dads.

Another purpose behind grossly mischaracterizing yesterday’s dads is that it gives today’s dads the license not to critically examine their own lack of involvement. Asked why they are not seriously engaged in, or responsible for, childcare, fathers can justify their physical and/or psychological absence by saying they are doing a lot more than all the dads who came before. (Again, hyperbole is the key.) Or they can claim that they should get credit for whatever they do with their children, even if it is minimal, because they have had to invent (presumably for the first time) what it means to be a nurturing father.

The implication is that yesterday’s dads were completely incompetent as parents and did absolutely no child care. If we hope to achieve gender equality, these hyperbolic narratives must be recognized for what they are: mythologies that reinforce and reproduce institutionalized sexism.

Needless to say, throughout a nation and throughout the world, there is not just one mythology of fatherhood, but many. I have focused on hyperbolic progressive narratives (compared to the dads of today, the dads of the 1950s, as a whole, were terrible), because these are frequently used to caricature fathers in the post World War II era. It is important to note, however, that hyperbolic regressive narratives (the dads of the 1950s were uniformly wonderful) have also been inserted in books and articles and can be damaging as well. (Certainly we should be smart enough not to reduce the history of fatherhood in the 1950s to television’s Father Knows Best or any other sitcom.) Whether it is a hyperbolic progressive narrative or a hyperbolic regressive narrative, the lumping and splitting process is still in play. In both, too, the politics of identity (someone’s or a group’s) is at the core.

It is not that we should be suspicious of anything said about yesterday’s or today’s dads, but that we should be wary of gross generalizations that conceal rather than reveal. Stereotypic history renders people and events in the most naive terms. Serious history, in principle, does not.

This essay is based on remarks made at a “Myths of the American Family” conference, sponsored by the Emory University Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life; and, with a focus on the 1950s, advances ideas that were first put forth in The Modernization of Fatherhood: A Social and Political History (1997) and “Stories and Relationships,” Journal of Social and Personal Relationships (1995).
unrelated adults care about their well-being and offer healthy guidance and varied forms of support. Thus, when responsible men of good will direct their energies to help youth inside and outside of families, good things tend to happen. Most of the male youth workers whom I’ve talked to and observed in action are genuinely eager and effective in helping kids thrive. They shine because they provide youth valuable forms of social capital, often times serving as an important bridge between child and parent, and between different institutions. In numerous instances, youth workers mentor boys and girls, helping them develop knowledge, skills, and more self-confidence.

One sign of men’s attachment to youth in public settings is the familial language some adopt when referencing the kids they serve. Listen to the director of a Boys & Girls Club when he affectionately refers to the kids attending his facility, “my ultimate responsibility is to protect my babies. And I can’t let anyone or anything hurt them.” Or note the childcare facility owner explain his relationship to his young clients, “I dedicate most of my time to them. I love them just like they’re mine.” The teacher’s aide reveals much by his remark, “to build that relationship with someone or child and to still see them from time to time and see what they’ve grown into, I mean its just like being a father.” And the Boy Scout leader punctuates his familial sentiments when talking about his troop, “my kids are my kids. . . . I just got a big family out there.” These men, and countless others like them, illustrate facets of a collective orientation in which they see boys and girls in diverse settings as though the kids were in a sense, their own. Even though most men work with kids whom they do not perceive in their own. Even though most men work with kids whom they do not perceive in

my attitude toward DCF is they are a big organization that doesn’t have a clue what they are doing. Because . . . we’ve got a bunch of parents and a bunch of fathers finally involved. . . . this kid doesn’t have a father but at least for one night he does. Here’s a guy that’s making s’mores with him, sitting around the fire, and he doesn’t care that this kid is hanging on him because he’s having s’mores and he’s making hamburgers for him, and he’s making sure the kid’s okay. And then DCF comes in and they’re like, “Well, you know, there’s supposed to be eighteen inches between each person.” And I’m thinking, “It’s a freakin’ tent.” “Well, who’s making sure that nothing inappropriate is happening?” and I’m like, “Agh [disgusted sound].” I think that’s pretty much what killed the fatherhood initiative.

Although Brandon was frustrated with the bureaucracy, he loved working with kids in all sorts of settings. He is one of those rare men who have actually worked with young children in a formal child care or educational setting. Unfortunately, in a status-driven, homopsychic society, men are clearly dissuaded from pursuing many child-oriented jobs. Authentic and pervasive gender equity will only emerge when it is equally acceptable and expected for men and women to be involved with children in various ways—including those tied to nurturance.

The larger cultural narrative needs reworking so that more men actively embrace both a collective consciousness to value all youth and a generative spirit to give back to them. One practical step is to support creative mentorship programs involving fathers of children 10-17 years-of-age. With the father taking the lead, a father-child pair can jointly mentor a younger at-risk child while the father directly teaches his child the value of helping others.

Such a program underscores the potentially reciprocal relationship between youth work and fathering. It is no coincidence that those deeply invested in their youth work, and open to learning from their experiences with youngsters, seem more equipped to express themselves as loving, active fathers. Likewise, men committed to being positively involved with their own
Memories of My
“Rich Uncle,” Reuben Hill

by E. Jeffrey Hill, Brigham Young University, jeff_hill@byu.edu

In Fiddler on the Roof, Tevye encourages his wife Golde to accept their future son-in-law because he has a “rich uncle.” Tevye’s assumption is that being the nephew of a wealthy prominent person would make up for other significant shortcomings in his daughter’s fiancé. In many ways Reuben Hill was my “rich uncle” whose life, even after he passed away, continued to make up for my own significant weaknesses, especially in the scholarly endeavor of family.

My Uncle Reuben was very rich indeed; but not necessarily in material prosperity. He was rich in intellect, vision, focus, organization, communication, mentoring and relationships. For those too young to have known him, let me explain that he is often known as the first family sociologist— the grandfather of the study of the family. He nurtured this fledgling field by writing hundreds of scholarly articles and books still cited today, penning the first successful family textbook which sold more than a million copies. He was also involved in developing the ABCX model to study family stress, helping to create the family development conceptual framework, serving as president of the International Sociological Association, collaborating to establish the Theory Construction and Research Methodology Workshops at NCFR, and on and on. He also reviewed literally thousands of articles providing insightful and sometimes brusque critiques. He mentored by seeing the best in others’ work, but also by demanding their best. His colleague, University of Notre Dame Professor Joan Aldous, remembered him this way, “His best memorial is for us all to continue to do our best, both in our personal life and with respect to this demanding, exasperating, but endlessly fascinating specialty of the family to which he contributed so much (Adams, Aldous, Rodgers, Burr, and Klein, 1986, p.225).” However, in this brief article my purpose is not to share the well-documented accomplishments of my “rich uncle.” Instead, I want to share my personal experiences and reflections with Reuben Hill and his wife, Marion Ensign Hill, as they came to play an important role in my life both personally and professionally. I want to share memories and meanings of how my life interacted with Uncle Reuben and Aunt Marion as a nephew.

My first memory of Uncle Reuben and Aunt Marion is visiting them in Minneapolis as an inquisitive five-year old. My Dad was a public school educator and so our family had a tradition of taking cross-country summer vacations. I distinctly remember the fun we had in Uncle Reuben’s large four-floor house. What a home! I loved to go exploring because there seemed to be an infinite supply of rooms. Once I snuck down to the unfinished basement. It had a mysterious look because they vented the dryer down there and thick dust abounded everywhere. I remember being “caught” by Uncle Reuben. I expected to be reprimanded for being too inquisitive and being where I ought not to be. However, he just smiled at me and said, “You go and explore as much as you want. It’s good for you.”

Another time I remember playing hide-and-go-seek with my cousins. I was scurrying around upstairs trying to find a place to hide. I opened a closed door and found Uncle Reuben with his bifocals over his nose pouring over a stack of papers of gigantic proportions. I wondered why he was ruining all those papers by scribbling so much on them. I thought he might get in trouble for it!

My Dad always referred to his brother as “your famous Uncle Reuben” but I didn’t really know what that meant. I found out when my parents took me out of school so that I could go home and watch Reuben talk about families on the Art Linkletter Show. This program was a national staple watched regularly by tens of millions of Americans in the late 1950s. I jumped up and down when I saw Uncle Reuben walk on the stage and heard him introduced as a world expert on the family. There was my uncle in living black and white talking to everyone in America. Wow!! My Uncle Reuben really was famous! I decided I wanted to be a famous professor like him.

As I grew up I forgot about my wish to be like Uncle Reuben. My Dad told me that a career in academia didn’t pay enough to support a family and that I could do much better in business. I started a fruitful career in academia didn’t pay enough to support a family. My first wife and I had eight children, and so the money really came in handy. But then in the mid 1980s, after a decade or so in the corporate world, I started feeling restless. I wanted to do something new and “worthwhile.” Then I remembered my famous Uncle Reuben. I had not seen nor talked with him for fifteen years. When I decided I wanted to explore getting a Ph.D. in the family field, I decided to call him and get his advice about graduate schools. I put off

My Rich Uncle continued on page F10
Other Family Caregivers for Children: Aunts and Uncles

by Robert M. Milardo, Ph.D., University of Maine, rhd360@maine.edu

There are occasional disconnects between family scholarship and how people actually live their lives. One instance of this disconnection is the lack of a literature on aunts and uncles. In a review of ten leading introductory family textbooks, I found no reference to aunts, uncles, nieces or nephews. By omitting aunts and uncles from our inquiries of families, we inadvertently simplify how families actually operate across households. We omit an important area of some people's individual lives and one that influences their personal development and their understandings of themselves, as well as influencing in remarkable ways their siblings and their siblings' children. To fully understand families—when they are distressed and when they are resilient—we need to know about how they are actually lived and experienced.

The view of two heterosexual parents raising young children independently is largely mythic. For many, families are not self-contained private enterprises, tidy households largely closed off from community, and given the realities of raising children in dual-worker families, or single-parent families, private enterprise is hardly an option. Rather families are organized across multiple households. A sister learns of her niece's academic accomplishments not directly from her niece but from her older sister who happened to call their brother and father to the niece. A simple detail about a niece travels across several households each maintained by a sibling before finally arriving at the doorstep of an aunt, and in many instances such chains of communication often include grandparents. And as many parents know, nieces and nephews can be important conduits of information about adolescent children. A mother, and aunt, learns from a niece that her son has a new romantic partner, for instance. Nieces and nephews are influenced by their aunts and uncles, and just as importantly influence them. Like parenting, the effects of aunting and uncling are bidirectional. The organization of families across households describes a configuration of highly interdependent family units inclusive of adults and children. Articulating the relationships of aunts and uncles changes the way we understand families.

I did not intend to write a book about aunts and uncles or their nieces and nephews, at least not initially. I began with a simple interest in uncovering instances of men in caregiving roles, other than fathers. My own uncles were positive influences in my life, and I simply wondered if uncles were important in the lives of others. This was in early 2002. As I continued interviewing uncles and nephews, it became abundantly clear that I needed to speak with aunts and nieces. Families are ensembles and to fully understand them we must speak with all of the principals. In the end I interviewed 104 aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews and accumulated over 80 hours of recorded interviews.

How Active Are Aunts and Uncles?

Uncles and aunts vary widely in the depth of their relationships with nieces and nephews. Some maintain close and long-standing relationships, some do not. The closeness of adult siblings is an important determinant of the closeness of relationships among aunts and uncles with nieces and nephews. When adult siblings experience close relationships, they are more likely to develop and maintain relationships with each other’s children, and when the relationships of adult siblings are estranged, their relationships with nieces and nephews are limited. However sibling relationships among adults are often marked by regular contact—at least annual visits and frequently more often, as well as exchanges of practical and emotional support. The relationships of sisters are typically closer and distinctive as they give more help, a wider range of help, and are more willing than brothers to do practical tasks like helping with laundry and cleaning, helping in caring for an ailing sibling or parent, providing child care when needed (i.e., aunting), and their willingness to send cards and gifts creates and maintains a familial sense of place, meaning and ritual.

A variety of additional factors are central in influencing the relationships of aunts and uncles with nieces and nephews. Geographic distance can limit the development of their relationships, while on the other hand living in close proximity can encourage such developments. But simplistic equations are not terribly insightful or predictive of the course of personal relationships among kin. Contemporary mediums such as cell phones, personal or family web pages, and email can and do ameliorate the challenges of maintaining long-distance relationships by offering a convenient means by which family members can observe frequent contact and keep informed of one another’s daily lives. In many cases, social distance—or how close or distant family members feel to one another—trumps geographic distance as an influential factor. Other factors such as time-intensive careers and family obligations can impede the development of relationships among aunts, uncles, and children. On the other hand, less intensive personal obligations permit developing closer relationships. Childless aunts and uncles seem to become more involved with nieces and nephews relative to those adult siblings who become parents. Childless aunts and uncles indicate they encourage such developments.

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Immediately I started getting regular supportive correspondence from her. These were not emails but long, hand-written letters encouraging me to do my best to follow in the footsteps of her husband. She told me how proud of me Uncle Reuben would have been for leaving IBM and starting a new career. She would scour the newspapers and find interesting articles about work and family, clip them, send them to me, and ask for my comments.

When NCFR was in Minneapolis more than a decade ago, Aunt Marion asked me to stay with her and to be her escort to the conference. Everywhere we went she was respected, and I was taken seriously. I was blessed indeed! During that conference we had dinner with Joan Aldous at the hotel. For two hours they shared experience after experience and gave me insight about my uncle. I found out he had originally set out to be a chemist, but after a missionary experience in Nazi Germany he felt committed to using sociology for social-engineering to make the world a safer, better place. I asked Aunt Marion about the circumstances surrounding Uncle Reuben’s writing of his best-selling textbook about marriage in the 1940s. She answered matter-of-factly, “Reuben didn’t write it, I wrote it. I was a lot better writer than he was.” She then explained that Reuben had the ideas and had written the draft, but that she turned it into something more readable for over a million college students.

A couple of years ago, I got an unexpected phone call from Aunt Marion. She was moving out of the family home in Minneapolis to West Lafayette, Indiana where she could live in an assisted care facility close to her daughter. She said, “Jeff, I’m going through some of Reuben’s boxes that haven’t been opened in years. I can’t take them with me, but I can’t throw them away. Could I send some of them to you?” A few weeks later several heavy UPS boxes appeared on my front porch. I eagerly dragged them into my living room and carefully opened each one. I felt a sense of awe as I carefully sifted through these treasures. There were numerous musty carbon copies of manuscripts. It was then I realized that most of his articles were written on manual typewriters. How did he manage to be so prolific without a computer? Then I came across a quantitative article and tried to imagine how difficult it would be to calculate correlation coefficients by hand.

It was humbling to go through the breadth and depth of his mind as captured by these papers. He was indeed a giant, and I am a pygmy. Most exciting was to find the ultimate paper which related to my personal emphasis! I found he had written an article on the interface of paid work and family life written in the mid-1950s. In this article he clearly outlined some of the basic theses that the field is still wrestling with 50 years later. What I thought were insightful “new” ideas, my Uncle Reuben had already had a century ago.

In conclusion, let me declare that my life has been blessed beyond measure because I had a “rich uncle” Reuben Hill. Throughout my life, he has, with his reputation and knowledge, assisted me in my own dreams of being a family scientist. It’s nice to be a nephew!

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have more time available for children as well as an expressed interest in mentoring children. For some, relationships with nieces and nephews may be their only opportunity to become involved with children.

Generally, closer relationships among aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews emerge when adult siblings are engaged in one another’s lives, when they share similar values which emphasize maintaining family relationships, when aunts and uncles experience a sense of personal commitment to their nieces and nephews, and when they simply like one another because of similar dispositions and interests. If they happen to live near one another, all the better, but it is neither necessary nor essential.

**Basic Aunting and Uncling**

Common themes in the family work of aunts and uncles include providing support and companionship, acting as confidants, and modeling alternative family or career choices. Aunts and uncles supplement the work of parents in virtually all areas of the lives of their nieces and nephews. Their relationships change and adapt with the development of children and the needs of parents. During the labor-intensive years of infancy and early childhood, they provide parents with direct child care relief. During adolescence when issues of identity development are primary, they can ease or mediate conflicts between parents and teens, and just as importantly they provide support for parents and act as their confidants. They can and do often become critical sources of support in times of special need such as with the death of a family member or in cases of separation and divorce. Under some circumstances, aunts and uncles replace absent parents, or otherwise enact significant parental roles, and they are treated as such by their nieces and nephews.

In a variety of ways aunts and uncles enrich the lives of their nieces and nephews. Their contributions are often highly-valued, considered irreplaceable and unique, and derive from the longevity of their relationships, knowledge of family members, and ostensibly more objective perspectives. While at the same time they are often deeply affected by their experience, and sometimes mentored by the very children for whom they are responsible.

**Gender Differences**

Both aunts and uncles provide their nieces and nephews with advice regarding school and careers, as well as relationships with peers, parents and other family members. And, on occasion they are critical about the choices or actions of their nieces and nephews. Nieces and nephews value similar features in their favored aunts and uncles, with displays of support and active listening with minimal judgment being chief among the most valued qualities.

In two areas aunts and uncles differ in important ways. Aunts and nieces talk more about relationship issues and particularly the intimate relationships of nieces. In this regard aunts seem to know more about their nieces’ relational lives, than uncles do of nephews. Aunts offer their evaluations of the relational partners of nieces; they voice concerns about sexual activity, safety, health and unplanned pregnancies. They share their concerns about controlling, potentially abusive partners—often relating their personal experiences with such men. On the other hand, uncles do serve as role models, sometimes modeling positive relationships with other adults and children, and sometimes rather negative relationships (as do aunts). Aunts simply become more knowledgeable about nieces’ intimate relationships, and they express more concern about issues of health and safety.

Aunts and uncles also differed in their perspectives on issues of personal development and the balance of work and family life. For aunts and nieces the issue is critically important and often discussed. Aunts freely share their experiences of having children while maintaining a career, or of working in fields typically dominated by men, and the challenges that face women in seeking a balance of personal, professional and family lives. Uncles and nephews do not seem to discuss such issues with any regularity, or at least not as directly.

As aunts and uncles actively engaged in the lives of their nieces and nephews, they also actively mentor parents. They do so by sharing their perspectives, their experiences, or otherwise serving as counselors, advisers, or a supportive friend uniquely positioned because of their insider’s knowledge and long-standing relationships with all family members.

In summary, the relationships of aunts and uncles with their nieces and nephews can be significant, influential and of long duration. They are for an unknown proportion of families, and perhaps a substantial number, central figures mentoring children as well as their parents.

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**AN EXPANDED VISION**

children are likely to value and understand other youth.

Ultimately, more needs to be done to integrate the trajectories of men’s youth work and their fathering experiences to inspire more men to get involved with kids, and involved in supportive ways. Of course, efforts to develop an expanded vision of fathering depend on men realizing more fully how youth work and fathering can enrich their personal development. But policymakers, program directors, and other agents of social change must do their part to minimize the structural constraints that discourage men from getting more involved. For their part, family and gender scholars can generate empirically-based insights about the full range of men’s experiences with youth, including the intersection between fathering and youth work.

A traditional saying in Japan is “jishin, kaminari, kaji, oyaji” or “earthquakes, thunder, fire, and father.” These words represented what the Japanese feared most. Historically, Japanese fathers had great authority and power in the home. Similar to changes in the structure of American families brought on by industrialization, Japanese father’s roles within the family were marginalized while the provider/worker role took on greater importance. As the provider role took on greater salience, the homemaker role for women became exalted and the thunderous father receded from Japanese consciousness. This division of labor helped fuel the Japanese economy over the last four decades but, in its wake, has left a Japanese family system in upheaval and fathers perplexed about their paternal role.

Images of fathers from the 1970s until today are often negative. One example is the Japanese family as “fatherless.” Japanese families are fatherless not in the American sense; indeed, only 1% of Japanese children are born out of wedlock as compared to approximately 30% in the U.S. The image of powerful fathers gradually gave way to the absent and inept father. In the 1970s the new phrase for Japanese fathers was, “A father is most appreciated when he is healthy and out of the home.” Japanese families are seen as fatherless because of the worker role dominating how and where fathers spend their time. These fathers are often called “7-11 husbands,” the father who leaves at 7:00 a.m. and is home at 11:00 p.m. Japanese families are also seen as fatherless when fathers are physically present yet still remain uninvolved. Fathers are sometimes seen as lacking a desire to connect to their children. For example, Sunday is often the one day fathers have time off work but often fathers are portrayed as needing time alone to read the paper or take a nap or engage in their own hobbies without children.

Other deficit views of fathers in Japan are terms like “sodai gomi” or large trash (i.e., the father who occupies a space in the home with no defined role). For example, sodai gomi might be used to refer to a broken appliance like a refrigerator. It takes up space but provides no usefulness. This image is used to describe both fathers with children in the home and increasingly husbands as they retire and spend more time at home with their wives. In fact, in the case of retired husbands who now spend more time at home there are reports of RHS or “retired husband syndrome.” Wives who have RHS become psychologically ill through the stress of having their husband home. In cases of RHS, husbands place great demands on their wives to care for them and yet show little appreciation and respect. Lacking love and feeling deep resentment for how they are treated some women become physically ill. In one case, a wife had physical reactions that included ulcers, slurred speech and rashes. In a word, she seemed allergic to her husband.

Another image of fathers is the physically absent but psychologically present father. This image is most often found in the provider role of fathers. These fathers work hard as salarymen providing financially for their families but are limited in the time and emotional connection they share with their children. Despite the limited physical presence and interaction of fathers with their children, fathers are seen as psychologically present. Masako Ishii-Kuntz has found that in comparison to American and German fathers, Japanese fathers spend less time with their children. However, despite this limited involvement, children respect their fathers and see them as dependable.

Ishii-Kuntz credits mothers building up the father’s authority in the eyes of their children. A mother might say, “father is working hard for you today” or “you should appreciate what you have because your father works so many hours.” Interestingly, when mothers are employed, the positive perception of children toward their fathers decreases. Working mothers and changing gender roles raise questions on how the “provider role only” father will be viewed in contemporary Japan. Trends seem to highlight the provider role as important but not sufficient as involvement in childrearing.

Another example of the physically absent but psychologically present father are those who work away from their families. “Tanshin funin” is the term for unaccompanied job transfers where the father leaves his wife and children behind. These fathers cite maintaining their mortgage and their child’s education as the top reasons for leaving their families behind. This employment condition requires great sacrifice by fathers who battle loneliness and isolation and by mothers who must parent alone. This working style highlights the ingrained traditional belief of father as breadwinner and mother as homemaker.

Media accounts of fathering highlight the involved father as the new ideal for contemporary fathers. For example, a media campaign in 1999 stated that, “A man who does not help in child-rearing can’t be called a father.” This bold statement caused controversy in Japan as many older fathers who lived the provider role as the ideal dissented with this statement of fathering. Kiichi Inoue, a lawmaker opposed to the campaign said, “A parent-child relationship...
Father Involvement in Japanese Families

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How much is a typical Japanese father involved in his children’s lives? An international comparison of fathers reports that Japanese fathers do not spend as much time with their children as fathers in other countries. A cross-cultural study conducted by the National Women’s Education Center (NWEC) in 2005 showed that, on average, Japanese fathers spend 3.1 hours with their children on weekdays. This includes passive interaction time, such as when a father is reading a newspaper at the kitchen table where his children are eating breakfast as well as more active interaction time, such as when the father helps with homework. Some studies claim that if only active father-child interaction is counted, the typical Japanese father only spends between 17 to 30 minutes with his children every day.

The NWEC study indicated that Japanese fathers ranked second-lowest, following South Korean fathers, with respect to lack of time spent with their children. Time spent with children by fathers was much higher in other countries such as Thailand (5.9 hours), Sweden (4.6 hours) and the U.S. (4.6 hours). Interestingly, the 3.1 hour figure for Japanese fathers was a slight decrease from ten years ago (3.3 hours). In contrast, time spent with children by mothers was longest in Japan (7.6 hours/weekday) among the six comparison countries, and showed an increase from ten years ago (7.4 hours/weekday). Generally, fathers in Japan tend to delegate most household and childrearing responsibilities to mothers, and this tendency seems not to have changed much in the last decade.

Many Japanese fathers, however, do wish to increase their participation in the household activities and particularly childrearing. The NWEC report also indicated that while in 1994, only 27.6% of fathers expressed their desire to spend more time with their children, in 2004 that number had increased to 41.3%. The increase likely reflects a change in social expectations toward men to be more nurturing than before. Despite this change in societal attitude, there are many structural, cultural, and social factors which prevent men from becoming actively involved fathers.

What barriers do Japanese fathers face in childrearing?

One of the challenges that Japanese fathers face is a corporate culture which is insensitive to men’s need for work-family balance. Long working hours are one of the barriers commonly cited by men for not being able to spend enough time with their family. In fact, one comparative study indicated that more than one in four Japanese fathers (28.1%) worked, on average, over 50 hours per week in 2000, which was significantly higher than other comparison nations—U.S., England, Germany, France, and Sweden.

In an attempt to improve the current working conditions for their employee fathers, a growing number of companies are introducing paid childcare leave systems which was also encouraged by the Japanese Government. The national Childcare Leave policy guarantees up to one year (or one and a half years for special circumstances) of parental leave after the arrival of a child, with a subsidy equivalent to about 50% of their regular wages paid by Employment Insurance. Nevertheless, a report by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare documented that, while about 80% of mothers took or are planning to take Childcare Leave, less than 1% of fathers took this leave or are planning to do so. Why?

According to the fathers, they were reluctant to take the leave because “it would cause too much trouble for other workers,” “I’m too busy to take it,” “nobody in my office takes it,” “my employer is not supportive,” “I’m afraid of losing my current position,” “I cannot afford the decrease in income,” and “My wife/partner took/will take it.” These responses clearly illustrate that Japanese corporate culture is not supportive of men taking paternity leave.

The hierarchical corporate culture is deeply rooted in traditional Japanese culture. Obedience to group norms and conformity are well-documented as Japanese cultural traits. The ability to be sensitive toward others’ needs, form peaceful relations with others, and even sacrifice himself/herself for group needs is viewed as a cultural ideal and is greatly valued over individual needs. As a result, corporate culture implicitly pressures employees not to leave work earlier than their boss. Men are also expected to socialize with their colleagues, such as going out for a drink after work. All of these fulfilled expectations directly reduce men’s time allocation to his family.

Further, a strong societal gender stereotype contributes significantly in fathers’ lack of involvement in childrearing. Even though Japan is one of the most highly-industrialized countries in the world, when compared to men and women in other industrialized nations such as the U.S., Sweden, Germany, and South Korea, more Japanese men and women agreed with the statement, “The husband should be the breadwinner and the wife should stay at home.” Strong gender role expectation externally and internally prevents men from shifting their responsibilities to child care.
is not determined by child care.” It seems that Japan has been ambivalent towards fathering in the last decade. Societal and political discourse encourages involved fathering, but there are limited ideas, plans, and programs to implement these new ideals of fatherhood into reality. Resistance is still felt in the traditional political, societal, and economic models of what it means to be a Japanese father.

Images of involved fathering are hard to find in research on fathering in Japan. Most studies show Japanese fathers lagging the involvement of fathers in other countries and falling far short of what their wives are doing within the home. Real examples of invested fathers are often the outliers in research on fathering and are easily lost in the average. Despite this, it is obvious in the fathers I have seen over the last two decades that fathers are more involved in caring for their children. This is evidenced by fathers caring for their children at nursery school events, playing with their children at parks, and preparing food with their children at Saturday school activities. I have heard wives whose eyes light up and smile as they talk about how their husbands invest in sharing housework and childcare. Finally, fathers own words portray the love, care, and responsibility they feel for their children. One father shared, “It is difficult just thinking about father’s responsibility. I think that being a father or mother is a short time in our life, so I just want to enjoy being a father. I want to spend time with my kids and we want to discover new things together.”

In reviewing these various images of Japanese fathers, there is limited research to get a clear understanding of fatherhood in Japan. Hiroshi Wagatsuma asked, “Has there actually been so drastic a transformation of the Japanese father from an authoritarian, strict, stern, and ‘thunderous’ figure into an irresponsible, overindulgent, weak, and ‘shadowy’ one?” He argued that the characterizations of Japanese fathers as shadowy figures with no real role in their families were premature as there was little or no empirical research to support these claims. Fortunately, Japan is in the midst of an era of parental rediscovery. Much like the late 1970s when fathers were rediscovered in American research, Japanese fathers are now taking a more prominent status in scholarship, the media, and in government policy discussions.

With this new attention on fatherhood, there has been increasing public and political discourse on the role of fathers in Japanese families. Part of this rediscovery seems related to social problems experienced in Japan such as the rise in juvenile delinquency and children refusing to attend school. These problems are often seen as a result of absent and uninvolved fathers who work long hours away from their families. Furthermore, the Japanese culture is experiencing major changes in gender and family roles. Marriage and birth rates are dropping, divorce is increasing, and more women are working and pursuing careers. Families where the man is the sole breadwinner and the woman is the homemaker are declining as a percentage of total families.

Despite the limited involvement of Japanese fathers with their children, we must be cautious that we see fathers in context. The provider role is a respected and salient role in Japanese society and families and we do not know how individual families interpret the father’s involvement through this role. When providing is excluded as involvement, Japanese fathers are much less involved than fathers in other countries. However, when we consider providing as one form of involvement, they are much more involved than other countries like America, where one third of children are born out of wedlock and will likely not have a relationship with their father nor receive the financial support most Japanese children take for granted.

In one of my studies of 422 Japanese fathers, families is rising. These social problems and changes are putting more emphasis on the need for supportive and involved husbands and fathers. Despite the limited involvement of Japanese fathers with their children, we must be cautious that we see fathers in context. The provider role is a respected and salient role in Japanese society and families and we do not know how individual families interpret the father’s involvement through this role. When providing is excluded as involvement, Japanese fathers are much less involved than fathers in other countries. However, when we consider providing as one form of involvement, they are much more involved than other countries like America, where one third of children are born out of wedlock and will likely not have a relationship with their father nor receive the financial support most Japanese children take for granted.

In one of my studies of 422 Japanese fathers, fathers felt they were most successful in providing for the material needs of their children. Fathers also felt that they were good at giving praise and affection. Fathers felt moderately involved in attentiveness to needs and activities, spending time and talking together, supporting their spouse in her role as mother, and taking responsibility for disciplining and teaching their children. Fathers felt least involved in encouraging their children in school, reading to their children and helping with homework, and in supporting their children’s talents. Interestingly, the areas where fathers scored lower may represent maternal gatekeeping. In Japan mothers are often called “kyoiku mama” or “education mother” whose primary role is to prepare children for life through their success in education.

In this study, psychosocial generativity and identity were the best predictors of fathers’ ratings of involvement. A father’s degree of paternal identity was also an important predictor of his level of involvement. This makes sense in a culture where involved fathering is not the norm because fathers would have to be self confident to act contrary to common fathering and masculinity stereotypes. Fathers with higher psychosocial intimacy and marital intimacy were more likely to cooperate with their spouse in raising children. Finally, fathers who worked more were less likely to give support to their spouse in her role as mother and were also less likely to attend their children’s events or care for their children’s everyday needs.

Images and realities of Japanese fathers have evolved over the last five decades from “thunderous” to “fatherless” to “involved.” What is the future of fathering in Japan? I am optimistic that the best is yet to come and that the “involved” father will become the norm for Japanese families. I believe changing gender and demographic forces will encourage men to invest more in marriage and fathering. These same forces are putting pressure on economic institutions to become more family and father friendly. I believe family life education can provide support for these changes by helping couples increase their marital satisfaction and by helping fathers strengthen their paternal identity and knowledge of parenting. Time will write the next chapter in the changing culture of Japanese fatherhood. Hopefully increasing interest and research on the importance of Japanese father involvement will document these changes.
FATHER INVOLVEMENT

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attention from work to family and pressures on women to become the primary caretaker of the family.

Contrary to popular belief, however, this gender ideology is not really indigenous to Japan, but rather imported from Western society. During the Industrial Revolution in the West in the nineteenth century, history observed a change in family where men started to work outside the home, mostly in factory jobs. Women took on the primary responsibilities for household chores and childrearing. This family system was quickly adopted in Japan as an effective strategy to increase national production and global competitiveness. Although many Japanese researchers and activists alike have pointed out the many negative consequences of gender inequality and are working toward deconstructing the unbalanced gender ideology—including concepts such as the myth of motherhood—strong gender role stereotypes are still prevalent in Japan.

What are the consequences of lack of father involvement?

The father’s absence impacts not only the father and children, but also the entire family system: father-child, father-mother, and mother-child relationships. One obvious cost of father non-involvement is weakening of the bond or attachment between the father and child. Regardless of the love and care fathers have toward their children, many fathers have a difficult time earning their children’s trust. A survey conducted by the Japanese government in 2007 reported that less than one-third of fathers were aware of their children’s concerns compared to two-thirds of mothers. Today, the term “paternal authority” belongs to the nation’s past. Many fathers struggle with connecting with and disciplining their children, which may partly contribute to the decline in academic skills and increase in behavioral problems among children.

Less father involvement in family matters also strains marital relationships. With the urban nuclear family being a national norm in Japan, communication between spouses is critical for healthy family functioning. Yet, the unbalanced division of labor by gender undermines the couple’s ability to have shared family experiences. By not spending much time with his family, fathers may be excluded from important family matters while mothers may feel isolated and vulnerable about having to carry excessive responsibility for family management and childrearing. This, in turn, results in a lower level of marital satisfaction as well as the ability of a couple to form a strong parental alliance.

Mothers’ isolation regarding childrearing has been identified as a serious problem since the 1980s. Without much social support from extended family members, many mothers commonly experience stress, frustration, and anxiety related to child-rearing. Past studies found a strong association between higher level of maternal stress and anxiety toward childrearing and lower level of father involvement. Furthermore, limited father involvement in childrearing appeared to be the most significant predictor of mothers’ lack of confidence in their parenting abilities.

Many researchers raise a serious concern about mothers’ feelings of isolation because higher levels of maternal stress and anxiety are related to higher incidences of child behavioral problems, and even worse, child abuse and neglect.

What is Japan doing to help fathers?

Recognizing the various negative consequences of gender inequality in society, the Japanese government passed the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society in 1999. Since then, the government has created many programs and policies that are intended to decrease the gender gap in all aspects of society. To demonstrate their emphasis on father involvement, the Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare carried out a campaign with the controversial catch-phrase, “Men who don’t take part in raising their children shouldn’t be called fathers.” The impact of these governmental efforts, however, was not as great as they expected. For example, as described earlier, less than one percent of fathers utilize paternity leave even though the governmental goal is to have at least 10% of fathers take some form of paternity leave. Many family scholars claim that the lack of visible impact from these policies and programs is due to the fact that the government is not truly concerned about gender inequality or fathers, but rather about how to deal with the declining birthrate and growing elderly population. Currently, Japan is experiencing the lowest birthrate and highest rate of aging of any country in the world. This rapid change of the population pyramid threatens to ruin the national pension system and the universal health insurance system, both of which are supported by the active labor force in society. An obvious solution to these problems is to increase the birthrate and to produce a high quality labor force. Thus, the government’s true goal in promoting gender equality is to increase the birthrate by creating a better childrearing environment, (i.e. by supporting women’s labor force participation and encouraging men’s involvement in household chores and childrearing.)

Regardless of the true motivation of their efforts, however, it is obvious that the governmental policies will not work unless the employers and employees are actively engaged in changing the workplace environment. Perhaps, more active strategies at multiple levels of society may be necessary to change the current situation for fathers.

At the national level, more affirmative action targeted at fathers with young children should be taken. For example, Dr. Miyuki Shimoebisu, Associate Professor at Tohoku University, suggests that the compensation which men receive during paternity leave should be drastically increased from current rate to a figure such that the numbers of paternity leave takers reaches the national goal.

More importantly, employers need to recognize men’s need for work-family balance and to develop appropriate policies, such as flexible work time options, a no-overtime-work day, allowing telecommuting, or fathers’ support groups in the workplace, which will encourage fathers to spend more time with their families.

Communities can also promote active father involvement by providing work-family-balance workshops and support groups. Similarly, education for the younger generations needs to start before men enter the labor force, marry and have children.

Fathers who wish to spend more time with their families are undoubtedly increasing in number. Now it is time to change the social system to actualize these desires.
A new study shows that girls start to menstruate earlier when they experience biologically-disrupted homes (families in which the biological parents are separated or divorced) in early childhood. When a girl starts life with a high-risk father in the home, and then the family breaks up and that father leaves, her timing of puberty changes. She gets her first period about a year earlier than does either her older sister or other girls from disrupted families whose fathers do not display high-risk behavior.

Background
Fathers affect the physical and social environments of their children and, in turn, their timing of puberty. Part of this influence may be chemical: Fathers emit pheromones—airborne chemical signals that trigger behavioral and physiological responses in other members of the same species—that may alter the timing of sexual development in daughters. Animal research has shown that male pheromones have different effects on young females, depending on biological relatedness: Exposure to the pheromones of biological fathers appears to slow down puberty in girls, while exposure to the pheromones of unrelated adult males appears to speed it up.

The influence of pheromones may help explain why the break-up of biological families, especially when followed by the departure of the biological father from the home and subsequent entry of a stepfather, is linked to early puberty in girls—a known risk factor for teen pregnancy and an array of health problems in adolescence and adulthood. Specifically, girls whose parents get divorced and who then live without their biological fathers, or live with stepfathers, tend to start their periods earlier. Girls who grow up in intact families—with both their mother and father—tend to start their periods later. At the same time, these changes in puberty are also influenced by the stresses associated with family disruption and change. Animal research suggests that the combination of pheromones and stress are most likely to accelerate puberty.

The evolutionary explanation is that children adjust their development to match the environments in which they live. In the world in which humans evolved, dangerous or unstable home environments meant a shorter lifespan. Going into puberty earlier in this context increased chances of reproducing and passing on your genes.

Despite the plausibility of this scenario, it could be wrong. Indeed, behavior geneticists have argued that the relationship between growing up in families without a resident father and early puberty may be more likely to grow up without their fathers in the home.

The study asked two questions:

(1) Did the sisters’ age of first menstruation vary depending on which sister lived with her father longer?

(2) Did living longer with a certain type of father lead to differences in the sisters’ timing of puberty?

What researchers are still trying to figure out, then, is whether growing up in a biologically-disrupted home without a resident father actually causes the timing of puberty to change. And if so, does girls’ exposure to different types of fathers (normative vs. high risk) at different points in their childhood matter?
about 5 and 12 years old, on average, when the parents split up. Sisters from the intact families had a similar gap between their ages. Why did the researchers choose these two groups? They wanted to see whether living longer in a disrupted family—without dad—led the younger sister to get her period earlier than her older sister. Consider a typical sister pair. They have the same biological mother and father, but one was 5 and the other 12 when the parents broke up and the dad moved out. On the one hand, the younger sister spent more of her childhood (7 more years) in a disrupted family without her father in the home. On the other hand, the older sister spent more of her childhood in an intact family with her father there. In other words, the sisters differed by 7 years in the amount of time they lived with their dad. Did that different length of exposure to their father lead to differences in when the two sisters got their first periods? The theory states that the younger sisters should get their periods first in the disrupted families but not in the intact families.

The second question came out of previous research, which suggests that a parent’s personal characteristics can change the course of a child’s development. For example, living with a father who displays high-risk behavior (e.g., a history of violence, depression, imprisonment) often creates bad results for children. The researchers wondered whether the impact of dads on their daughters’ puberty might also depend on the amount of high-risk behavior that the dads engaged in.

Findings
The answer to whether a sister’s age at first menstruation changes based on how long she lived with her father is: It depends on the type of father.

- As predicted, more time living without a dad in the home led to earlier puberty. That is, younger sisters in biologically-disrupted families reached puberty earlier than their older sisters did. No such trend emerged in biologically-intact families.

- However, this finding was moderated by the amount of deviant or antisocial behavior displayed by the dads. Specifically, younger sisters only reached puberty earlier if they had been exposed in childhood (typically the first 5 years of life) to a high-risk father, and then that father moved out of the house.

- These younger sisters got their first periods about a year early, compared to their older sisters or other younger sisters from disrupted families whose fathers did not display high-risk behaviors.

- In other words, the reason these girls got their periods earlier was not because they lived for different amounts of time with any father. They reached puberty earlier because they lived for different amounts of time with a certain type of father when they were young.

Limitations
Although this research highlights the role of high-risk fathers in regulating the sexual development of their daughters, limitations should be noted. Foremost among them was the small sample size, which could have generated unreliable parameter estimates. The study also relied on recall of earlier life events, and these family memories could have been biased by time and life experiences. These limitations provide important directions for future research.

A Unique Quasi-Experimental Design
The study design examined the influence of fathers on daughters’ puberty, independent of possible genetic factors and of environmental conditions that are shared by entire families, such as poverty or religion.

- The researchers compared sisters with the same biological parents who grew up in the same home. In previous studies, girls who lived without a father were compared to girls who lived with both parents. These girls differed not only in whether or not they lived with their father. They also differed in genetic risks, race, religion, socioeconomic status, and everything else that differs between families. Therefore, if previous studies found a link between growing up without a father in the home and early puberty, researchers still would not know what caused the early puberty. It could be any factor linked to living in non-resident father families.

- To handle these shared environmental influences, the investigators of this study compared sisters who grew up in the same home. These sisters had the same religion, socioeconomic status, and other features that are shared within families. To control for genetic influences, the researchers studied full biological sisters who differed in age (birth order). Scientific evidence shows that birth order has nothing to do with genetic risk. That is, there is no known reason to expect that older sisters, as a group, are more at risk for certain genes than their younger sisters are. For example, imagine 100 families that have four children and a genetic risk for alcoholism. On average, the 100 firstborns of each family will have the same genetic risk for alcoholism as the 100 secondborns, and so on.

A Comparison: International Adoption Studies
Research on girls from developing countries adopted into wealthy Western families sheds light on this study’s finding. These girls regularly experience neglect, abuse, disease, and poor nutrition before they are adopted. Yet they experience much earlier puberty than children do from the same countries of origin or their host countries. Further, girls who are older when they are adopted (i.e., more than 2 years old) experience puberty at even younger ages.

The adoption studies indicate that, under very high stress conditions, girls’ bodies “shut down,” and their growth is stunted. However, when the stressor is removed by being adopted into stable families with plenty of food and social support, something happens to these girls. Their bodies seem to respond to a window of reproductive opportunity. Similar to the effect of a high-risk father leaving the home, they speed up puberty, as if to take advantage...
Gay Male Partners Achieving Joint Parenthood: Communication Issues and Challenges

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“I have two fathers—Daddy and Poppa.”

Today, in addition to the gay males reaching fatherhood through adoption as single individuals, an increasing number of gay male partners achieve fatherhood through adoption, frequently involving one man completing the adoption process as an individual followed by a second partner adoption in the states in which this is legal. In many cases the partner serves as a single father without legal standing. Increasingly gay male partners choose to create profiles on adoption websites, or create scrapbooks for an agency hoping a birth mother will read about their desire for a child and choose them. In addition, some adoption agencies are identified as “gay or lesbian friendly,” providing adoption counselors who are prepared to assist same sex couples in their quest for parenthood. Many couples who adopt domestically are offered children of a different race or ethnicity, not an uncommon practice when any adoptive parent is Caucasian, but this configuration adds one more distinctive feature to a family headed by two fathers. Frequently gay males and lesbians are more open to caring for children with special needs and, because adoption opportunities are more available to those willing to take in hard-to-place children, social service agencies in certain states support such adoptions.

International adoption remains an unlikely or highly complicated path for these couples, since most other nations will not support adoption if the prospective parents are openly gay or lesbian. Because international adoption has become a very desirable way to build a family, the number of available infants/toddlers is far less than the demand. In some cases same sex couples have chosen to conceal their partnership by choosing one partner to participate in the international adoption process as a single person. Recent changes in China’s regulations, requiring that only married couples will be considered as adoptive parents, is seen as a response to this practice. In his 2008 study of eight gay male adoptive couples, most of whom adopted internationally, Mark Gianino examined the challenges faced in their transitions to parenthood and the impact of the process on the couples’ relationships. Most couples selected agencies based on information from an informal grapevine of referrals from other lesbian and gay adoptive parents. Even then, they faced a series of challenges. Some couples chose to conceal their relationship throughout the entire adoption process.

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process, other couples did inform their social worker but were advised not to reveal their relationship to adoption officials abroad. Complications of creating such a fiction include: frustrations of the “invisible” second parent, caring for the partnered relationship, and issues involving anti-male gender bias.

Changes in foster care placement practices, due to a shortage of available homes, has made it possible for some gay male partners to become foster parents and eventually to adopt children released for adoption. Again, most of these fathers have to be willing to take hard-to-place children, although many of these children are known to them due to placement in their homes. Some couples choose to identify one partner as the foster parent and to create a friend or roommate fiction to explain the other male in the home. Same-sex couples face additional challenges as foster care parents because frequently social workers have not talked to the children about their placement with a same-sex couple, creating mild to serious difficulties with some foster placements.

Although partnered gay male parenting is receiving growing attention in the academic community, little is known about gay male couples reaching parenthood through surrogacy. The expenses and complications of this path to parenthood make it an attractive possibility for only a limited number of couples.

We recently completed a study of the communication challenges faced by fourteen gay male couples who became parents through surrogacy. Most of the local same-sex parenting support groups involve a much higher percentage of female participants. On line organizations, such as COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere), provide same-sex family models as well as access to social support. Only a small number of tradebooks or magazine articles depict the lives of gay male partners as parents.

Playing the System. Most gay couples wishing to adopt face the issue of openness regarding their relationship and sexual orientation. Because in many cases it is easier to adopt as a single person, partners must examine their values and feelings regarding the creation of such a fiction. If they do so, the “invisible” father-to-be must confront his own feelings and reactions to being in this position, a situation that affects both members of the couple. In other cases they need to decide if they are willing to collude with a social worker in creating a fiction about their couple status with an international agency.

Dealing with Reactions of Family and Friends. In contrast to the joy expressed by key social network members when heterosexual partners announce the onset of parenthood, reactions from significant others may be mixed. Although some family members and friends are totally supportive of gay male partners’ decision to parent, others challenge the decision with comments such as, “Is that fair to the child?” Even those individuals who have celebrated the partners’ relationship may challenge their decision to raise a child, because they see it as a burden for the child to be raised in such a non-traditional household.

Encountering Beliefs about the Necessity of a Mother. Although a family without a father has become normative, the reverse is not the case. Close friends and family members may express the belief that “Every child needs a mother” as they discourage partners’ efforts to achieve parenthood. In addition, strangers tend to view two men with children as a “Dad” and an uncle, friend, or other unrelated male. Hearing regular comments such as, “Oh, Mom’s night out?” or “Your wife is so lucky you will babysit” raises the concern of whether, and how, to respond—each time. Factors that influence the decision to respond and come out as a gay parent involve whether or not children are old enough to understand the conversation, and whether an adult wishes to engage in a conversation about their family form with a stranger/acquaintance.

Adjusting to Social Network Changes. Although lesbian communities tend to have strong networks with members representing multiple lifestyle choices, gay males who have chosen parenthood tend to be distanced from the overall gay male community, either by choice or by exclusion. In some cases gay males who seek parenthood are seen as “going straight” by other gay males who disapprove of their choice.

Gay male fathers report that they are much more involved in social networks that involve heterosexual parents of the school-aged child’s friends than members of the gay community.

Finally, these gay male parents face issues similar to those frequently encountered by lesbian parents—frustrations with organizations, such as schools, that assume all two-parent families are headed by a mother and a father and where the school curriculum on families seldom, if ever, recognizes same sex parents.

As opportunities for gay male partners to achieve fatherhood jointly slowly increase, the issues identified above will need to be addressed by academic professionals and social service professionals. The frontier of gay male fathering presents challenges to the pioneers yet, over the next decades this family form may be described in a variation of Hertz’s statement, suggesting that the American conception of the gay male identity is moving into a normative identity which includes fatherhood.
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of the dramatically improved situation. Some researchers say this phenomenon occurs only during a “sensitive time period” in development. Girls in early to middle childhood who transition from a very stressful to a much less stressful home environment may experience an important acceleration of puberty.

Implications for Practitioners

Parents and clinicians need to know that stressors such as divorce and exposure to high-risk fathers put girls at increased risk during sensitive periods in their development. Girls’ experiences can result, on average, in the speeding up of puberty by almost one year. That one-year acceleration increases girls’ risk of breast cancer by 5%. It also makes it more difficult for them to manage the challenges of adolescence.

This research offers insight into the debate over what type of parenting gives children the most advantages in life. Is “perfect” parenting better for kids than “good enough” parenting is? In this study, when a father functioned in the normative range, the amount of time his daughter lived with him had little effect on her first menstruation. Only time spent with a father who showed deviant or antisocial behavior, followed by his absence, put the daughter at risk for earlier puberty.

More important than the presence or absence of a father is his behavior. It is not enough simply to have a cardboard cut-out of a father sitting on the couch. What he does in the family is critical.


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- David C. Bell (2008), Constructing Social Theory, Rowman & Littlefield.
- Marlene S. Lobberecht, CFCS, CFLE and Maxine Hammonds-Smith, PhD., CFLE (2008), Bottom Line Quick Start for Emerging Entrepreneurs, Outskirts Press, Inc.

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