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Commentary on "A Needs Assessment Examining Low-Income Fathers' Barriers to Participation in Parenting Programs"

Jean Ann Summers
University of Kansas Main Campus, jsummers@ku.edu

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The authors of this thought-provoking paper are addressing a critical issue that has long been of interest not only in the field of child welfare, but also in early childhood education: the role of fathers in children's lives, and the struggle to provide meaningful support to those fathers in order to enhance their role. The authors conducted three focus groups involving men from low-income backgrounds, to explore: (a) where men find information and advice about parenting, (b) whether they participate in parenting programs, and (c) their attitudes about discipline for their children. As a member of the Early Head Start (EHS) Father Studies Work Group, I participated in research about father involvement that encompassed more than a decade of work through the 1990s and early 2000s. As part of a larger EHS Longitudinal Research Study, we interviewed 769 fathers using a variety of qualitative and quantitative measures in 14 sites around the U.S. Using that research experience as a frame of reference, I will comment about each of three themes addressed by the authors of this paper.

Sources of Parenting Information

Lee and colleagues asked focus group participants where they got information or advice about parenting, and the response was that they most often turned to other men and fathers in the community "as a primary source of parenting information." There were more nuanced findings in our EHS study. First, the EHS fathers we studied overwhelmingly identified their wife/partner (i.e., their child's mother), followed closely by their own mothers, as sources for advice about parenting (Summers, Boller, & Raikes, 2004). Especially for those fathers whose own father was absent or not a major part of their childhood, their mothers were respected as being "both a mother and a father" to them. For those fathers who did cite their own father or another male role model, some of the "advice" was from the vantage point of negative example, i.e., fathers who were absent or abusive led to their determination to be more available to their own children (Shears, Summers, Boller, & Barclay-McLaughlin, 2006).

The question of where to find advice about parenting is tied to a larger question regarding the social construction of the meaning of "good fatherhood" (Jarrett, Roy, & Burton, 2002; Summers et al., 2006). It appears that fathers derive many of their ideas about "good" fatherhood from their own experiences. Like the focus group participants in this study who pointed to the stereotype of "deadbeat dads," fathers in other studies consistently described the importance of taking responsibility for their children. By this they often meant financial responsibility, but also meant

being emotionally and physically available to their children (Summers et al., 2006). For these fathers, the lack of a job was a major impediment to their ability to "be there" for their children (Jarrett et al., 2002). The social construction of father roles in U.S. society suggests that the ability to support one's child financially is a "ticket" to engagement with their child. Therefore, gaining advice about parenting is inextricably tied to the broader meaning of being a father, and includes the ability to find and keep employment to enable fathers to take responsibility for their families. This suggests, as the participants in Lee and colleagues' study also note, that parenting services in the context of broader community programs (see below) would be more welcome.

Parenting Services in the Community

The focus group participants described by Lee and colleagues in this issue discussed a need for community parenting programs where they could engage in activities with their child. They also stated their aversion to the idea of "parenting classes," out of fear that they were associated with child protective services. This was consistent with our EHS study findings. Many of the respondents in the EHS study viewed the prospect of structured parenting classes with profound suspicion and as an invasion into family privacy (Summers et al., 2004). There was an aversion to being seen as "needy," or giving control to others. As one father put it, "I'd rather do it on my own instead of letting them people tell me what to do with my child" (Summers et al., 2004, p. 71). However, this did not mean that all the fathers in the EHS study discounted the idea of parenting classes or other types of parent training (e.g., home visits). They often reported that their partner had benefited and that they had, through their child's mother, gained benefits. Given these findings, it may be important to note that even those fathers who do not physically attend parent training programs may be benefiting indirectly from such services. Perhaps development of more explicit ways to transmit information via mothers (e.g., handouts "especially for dad") could expand on this strategy for transmitting parenting information.

Related to this, however, it is important to address the role of mothers as gatekeepers, both in enabling fathers to access their children, and in enabling them to access more formal parenting services. Non-residential fathers may be in conflict with their child's mother, and may therefore be unable to spend time with their child or find that access is used as a "bargaining chip" for getting support (Shears et al., 2006). Even when the relationship is intact, mothers may be reluctant to include fathers in parenting programs and may see it as an intrusion into their

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"territory" (McAllister, Wilson, & Burton, 2004). Therefore, meaningful involvement of fathers in parenting programs may require, first, persuading mothers about the advantages to both themselves and their children of encouraging their child's father to participate.

Perceived Norms about Parenting Practices

Lee and colleagues report that the focus group participants discussed parenting practices, specifically discipline techniques. They expressed concern that sanctions against physical discipline such as spanking placed serious constraints on their ability to teach their children respect and discipline. The focus on discipline in the questions asked these focus group participants was quite appropriate given the scope and purpose of this study. However, a broader view of men's perspectives of their roles and the meaning of "good fatherhood" suggest that much of the traditional conceptualization of the meaning of fatherhood revolves around two primary roles: financial support and discipline. Other roles, such as caregiving and emotional nurturing, have not until recently been part of social constructions of father roles (Palkovitz, 2002). For those fathers from low socio-economic backgrounds who have not had opportunities to develop an expanded vision of what fatherhood means, discipline may be their only way of relating to their child, and removal of physical discipline as an option may feel like closing off an avenue to the father's perception of what it means to be a responsible father. Reduction of physical discipline, then, may involve broader parenting education than simply offering new ways of discipline. The idea of being able to listen to one's child, play together, and otherwise be engaged, may produce new and better ways of relating to the child that will enable a father to feel competent without using more traditional means of interacting with his child.

All in all Lee and colleagues contribute an important puzzle piece to the broader picture of enhancing fathers' parenting skills and participation with both their child and with community parenting programs. Encouragement of fathers to be engaged more broadly and successfully with their children will require a comprehensive approach to empowering fathers and building their sense of competence both as men and as fathers in their families and communities.

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