

Spring 2010

# Father Absence and Self-Esteem Amongst Economically Disadvantaged Children

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FATHER ABSENCE AND SELF-ESTEEM AMONGST ECONOMICALLY  
DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN

A project based upon an independent investigation, submitted  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts in Social Work.

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2010

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Father Absence and Self-Esteem  
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ABSTRACT

Children begin to build self-esteem in early childhood based on social and emotional development. Previous research has shown that children inhabiting homes where the biological, adoptive, or step father are present have shown to exhibit higher levels of self esteem and social functioning. However, further information regarding the positive male influence, lesbian parenting, or the absence of “paternal absence” stigmas have show to contradict the previous research. This study investigated the self-esteem of economically disadvantaged children using results from the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment as it relates to the levels of father involvement. 115 children ages 3-5 involved in a governmentally subsidized pre-school and case management program were studied using a composite DECA score as rated by both parents and pre-school providers. Family case managers and student files were used to yield demographic data and data regarding paternal presence and involvement. To determine possible relationship, this information was synthesized into charts and analyzed using non-parametric correlations (Mann Whitney Test and Spearman’s r). The findings revealed no significance between the levels of paternal involvement and participant’s self-esteem. The findings of this work are intended to inform the social work profession of the benefits of further inclusion of fathers in social service interventions and promote social policy to advocate for the rights of fathers in the human services field.

## OUTLINE

### I. Introduction

#### a. Problem Formulation

- i. Economically disadvantaged children who do not have fathers present have shown to have lower levels of self-esteem and security as compared to peers who do have fathers present.

#### b. Problem Justification

##### i. *Numbers* – Who is effected and how many involved

1. Between 1960 and 2006, “the number of children living without fathers in single-mother homes grew from 8 percent to 23.3 percent, while 34 percent of children currently do not live with their biological fathers” (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007 as cited in National Fatherhood Initiative, 2008).
2. According to the 2005 U.S. Census Bureau “there are approximately 13.6 million single parents in the United States, and those parents are responsible for raising 21.2 million children”. Of these families, 84 percent are custodial mothers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007)
3. Approximately half of divorces involve families with at least one child, which affects about one million children a year (Fields, 2003).

- ii. *Social work practice*- Understanding any possible correlation between self esteem and father absence can inform social workers of risk factors involved in an attempt to do better work with clients in understanding the full breadth of issues surrounding a problem with low self esteem. A better informed practice will aid social workers in competently assessing situations and providing higher quality care to clients, which is required of social work professionals (according to the NASW Code of Ethics).

- iii. *Research* – The outcome or finding of this study could raise a flag to the roots of emotional health concerns, such as low self esteem in children, and support further research efforts to locate more profound environmental concerns to protect this vulnerable population. Gaining the basic understanding that this fist study may provide may open doors for further research to explore the complex connection of child-father relationships and the meaning they may have on the overall well-being of the family system.

- iv. *Policy* – support for policies surrounding reunification of the family can be strengthened by any results that point toward better social and mental health of children if their fathers are present. Also, further programs can be created that would support fathers in gaining better parenting skills to assist in more healthy family functioning.

### II. Main Points

#### a. Definition of *father absence* –

1. Paternal absence or father absence can be defined as “families where a biological, adoptive, or stepfather does not live in the same household as the children” (Nock & Einolf, 2008). This

absence can be due to death, divorce, career demands (military service for example), or separation.

2. Fathers can be either fully or partially absent
    - a. Fully absent fathers- due to death, incarceration, or abandonment.
    - b. Partially absent- life in a separate household due to divorce, separation, or were never married to the mother yet maintain contact with the child.
  3. Definition of a responsible father: (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998).
    - a. He waits to make a baby until he is prepared emotionally and financially to support a child
    - b. He establishes legal paternity
    - c. He actively shares the continuing emotional and physical care of their child, from pregnancy onwards
    - d. He shares the continual financial support of their child, from pregnancy onwards
  4. “But even when fathers live with their children, they may not be fulfilling their responsibilities as a parent. For example, fathers can be ‘technically present but functionally absent’”. (LaRossa & LaRossa, 1989).
  5. About 40 percent of children in father-absent homes have not seen their father at all during the past year; 26 percent of absent fathers live in a different state than their children; and 50 percent of children living absent their father have never set foot in their father's home (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2004, as cited in U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).
- ii. How did it come about (historically)
1. Increase in children born to unmarried mothers
    - a. Compared to children born within marriage, children born to cohabiting parents are three times as likely to experience father absence, and children born to unmarried, non-cohabiting parents are four times as likely to live in a father-absent home (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2009; Wineburgh, ).
    - b. High divorce rate
    - c. Increase in single women who chose to have a child through adoption or artificial insemination
  2. “Adults now marry later or forgo conventional marriages for cohabitation or other non traditional family formations” which usually result in higher prevalence of births to single women (about 34 percent of births) and higher rates of divorce. (Fatherhood Initiative, 2008)
  3. Pressure on fathers to be sole financial providers may cause lower income men or teenage fathers to flee situation

4. Individuals who are in poverty value marriage and aspire to marry. However, many face barriers in selecting partners with “adequate social and economic resources” (Kids Count, 2009, p. 10)
    - a. Barriers to marriage of low income men: low educational achievement, substance abuse, mental health concerns, high rates of incarceration (Kids Count, 2009)
  5. “43 percent of first marriages dissolve within fifteen years; about 60 percent of divorcing couples have children; and approximately one million children each year experience the divorce of their parents”. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009)
- iii. Implications for the family (who is effected and how)
1. “Children raised by engaged fathers.. demonstrate ‘a greater ability to take initiative and gain self control’” (Pruett, 1987)
  2. “Children are more likely to have strong coping and adaptation skills, stay in school longer, have longer lasting relationships” (Pruett, 1987)
  3. “A 26 year longitudinal study concluded that the most important childhood factor in empathy is paternal involvement” (Pleck, 1997)
  4. “Children are at greater risk for adverse consequences when born into single parent setting because of social, emotional, and financial resources available to them” (McLanahan, 1995)
  5. “In 1996, young children living with unmarried mothers were five times as likely to be poor and 10 times as likely to be extremely poor”. (National Center for Children in Poverty, 1996).
    - a. Children are more likely to be in poverty if they are from single family homes because of the potential for only one wage earner.
    - b. In RI in 2007, 78 percent of children living in poverty were living in single parent families. (KidsCount, 2009)
  6. “Children from father absent homes are more likely to experience emotional disorders and depression” (Amato, 1991).
- iv. Prevalence in United States and RI (numbers) – Statistics retrieved from KIDSCOUNT, 2009
1. 2009- Children in RI living in homes- 228,391
    - a. Children living in single parent homes- 67, 978
    - b. Percent total- 30%
- b. *Self esteem-*
- i. Definition: “most broad and frequently cited definition of self-esteem within psychology is Rosenberg’s (1965), who described it as a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the self” (Adler & Stewart, 2004)
    1. “Self-esteem also can be defined as feelings of capability combined with feelings of being loved” (Sheslow, 2008)
    2. Can lead to poor mental -- “Mental health in childhood and adolescence is defined as the achievement of expected developmental, cognitive, social and emotional milestones and by

secure attachments, satisfying social relationships and effective coping skills” (KIDS COUNT, 2009, p. 54)

- ii. Meaning for children and age range involved (3-5 years old)
  1. Children with high self esteem:
    - a. Act independently, assume responsibility, take pride in their accomplishments, tolerate frustration, handle peer pressure appropriately, attempt new tasks and challenges, handle positive and negative emotions, offer assistance to others (U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services (2002)
    - b. Use coping mechanisms that are healthy, appropriate, and lead to mastery and growth. (Brooks, 2008).
  2. Children with a healthy sense of self-esteem feel that the important adults in their lives accept them, care about them, and would go out of their way to ensure that they are safe and well. They feel that those adults would be upset if anything happened to them and would miss them if they were separated. (Katz, 1996)
    - a. The foundations of self-esteem are laid early in life when infants develop attachments with the adults who are responsible for them (Katz, 1996)
    - b. As young children learn to trust their parents and others who care for them to satisfy their basic needs, they gradually feel wanted, valued, and loved (Katz, 1996)
- iii. Risks involved with children with low self esteem
  1. People with low self esteem are “depicted as uncertain and confused about themselves, oriented toward avoiding risk and potential loss, shy, modest, submitting readily to other peoples influence, and lacking confidence in themselves.” (Baumeister, Bush & Campbell, 2000)
  2. “exhibit a low tolerance for frustration, giving up easily or waiting for somebody else to take over. They tend to be overly critical of and easily disappointed in themselves. Kids with low self-esteem see temporary setbacks as permanent, intolerable conditions, and a sense of pessimism predominates” (Sheslow, 2008)
- iv. Implications for later in life
  1. “Aggression and antisocial behavior are motivated by feelings of inferiority rooted in early childhood experiences of rejection and humiliation.” (Horney, 1950 & Adler, 1956 as cited in Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005, p. 328)
  2. “Individuals protect themselves against feelings of inferiority and shame by externalizing blame for their failures, which leads to feelings of hostility and anger toward other people.” (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005, p. 328)
  3. “Depletions in self-esteem are directly associated with increases in depressive symptoms over time” (Roberts, Gotlib & Kassel, 1996)
  4. “Self-esteem has a strong relation to happiness” (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003)

- c. *Economically disadvantaged children- Children in poverty*
    - i. *Definition-* percentage of children under the age of 18 who are living in households with incomes below the poverty threshold, as defined by the US Census Bureau. (Kids Count, 2009)
      - 1. 2009 poverty threshold for family of three with two children (single parent home)- \$18,310
      - 2. 2009 poverty threshold for family of four with two children- \$22,050 (US Dept of HHS, 2009)
    - ii. How this came about (historically) in RI
      - 1. The method for calculating the poverty threshold has not been adjusted since its development in the 1960's. Although prices on housing, child care, transportation, and medical care (Kids Count, 2009)
      - 2. "According to the 2008 RI Standard of Need, developed by the Poverty Institute, a single parent family with two children who have an annual income of \$30,800 (175% of the federal poverty level), along with subsidized child and health care would still fall short of paying for basic needs by \$48 a month" (KIDSCOUNT, 2009).
    - iii. Implications for children and families
      - 1. "Children who live in poverty for an extended period of time, especially those while in early childhood, are more likely to have health and behavioral concerns, have difficulty in school, become teen parents, and be unemployed as adults" (Moore & Redd, 2002).
      - 2. "Increased exposure to risk factors associated with poverty interferes with young children's emotional and intellectual development. Risk factors associated with poverty include: inadequate nutrition, environmental toxins, maternal depression, trauma and abuse, lower quality childcare and parental substance abuse" (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2002).
    - iv. Prevalence in US and/or RI
      - 1. Black and Hispanic children in RI and nationally are more likely to experience poverty as compared to white children (Fass & Cauthen, 2008)
      - 2. Children under age 6 tend to be at higher risk of living in poverty because their parents tend to be younger and have less work experience (Henry, Werschkul, & Rao, 2003).
      - 3. Highest prevalence of single parent homes- Central Falls (48 percent). (KIDS COUNT, 2009)
        - a. Central Falls also has the lowest median family income in RI (1999) for families with children under the age of 18- \$22,008 (KIDS COUNT, 2009, p. 26)
- III. Opposing Points: Children who function normally without father presence
- a. When father absence is not viewed as a stigma



- i. The stigma that children experience when they are members of father absent households involves illegitimacy, divorce, and abandonment which can be destructive to a child's development. However in locations and communities where father absence is the norm, these stigmas are not present and father absence does not have the same impact on these families. Places where father absence is high, such as among blacks in the United States, the Caribbean, Brazil, and the Caribbean coast of Central America there is no stigma and thus no negative impact. (Austin, 1989, as cited in Coleman, 1996, p. 124)
  - 1. "father absence has a negative impact on achievement only among groups where middle-class values are the accepted norm" (Heatherington, 1983, as cited in Coleman, 1996, p. 124)
  - 2. "Several studies have shown similar results among Black children researched in housing projects. Results failed to show that this population of children who had fathers who were absent achieved lower in regards to academic achievement as compared to peers from father present homes" (Herzog & Sudia, 1973, and Wasserman, 1972, as cited in Coleman, 1996)
  - 3. "Among Black children in inner city settings, the absence of fathers did not have a significant effect on sex role development. However, a surrogate male adult was usually present in place of the biological father" (Heatherington, 1983, as cited in Coleman, 1996)
- ii. Benefits of Maternal presence
  - 1. "Strong family networks among African American children are prevalent and provide friendship groups and access to community support. Financial assistance and support are frequently exchanged and the presence of the maternal grandmother is common" (Coleman, 1996, p. 125)
- b. Benefits of presence of other adult figures: *Gay Couples*
  - i. "Responsible fathering can occur within a variety of family structures" as neither the mother or the father are essential to child development. "Heterosexual marriage is not the only social context where responsible fathering can occur" (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999)
  - ii. For children raised with an all-female parental team without a male present in the household, "the female couple tend to be more involved in the children's lives and is in greater harmony in terms of parenting approaches" (NARTH, 2008)
  - iii. "Data on gay fathering couples have convinced us that neither a mother nor a father is essential"; "Children need at least one responsible caretaking adult who has a positive emotional connection to them, and with whom they have a consistent relationship" (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999)
    - 1. Gay and lesbian parents can create a positive family context
    - 2. "Neither the sex of the adult(s) nor the biological relationship to the child has emerged as a significant variable in predicting positive development". The strongest indicators instead are

- stability of the emotional connection and predictability of the care taking relationship for positive child adjustment (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999)
3. “Parenting roles are interchangeable” and “neither mothers nor fathers are unique or essential” to healthy child development and adjustment.
  - iv. “Children raised by lesbians without a male figure or father present are just as well adjusted socially as children with fathers” (Belkin, 2009; Grohol, 2009; NARTH, 2008).
    1. “Girls raised by lesbians are more likely to have high aspirations for professional careers like doctors or lawyers compared to girls raised by heterosexual partners who more frequently want to be teachers or mothers”. (Belkin, 2009; Grohol, 2009)
    2. “Boys raised by lesbians show to be less aggressive and more nurturing than boys raised in heterosexual families” (Belkin, 2009)
  - v. The power of one: coach, teacher, role model: “The potency of the power of [one person who can make a difference] suggests that the presence of a father is not as important as the importance of an individual who fills this role and all that it engenders.” (Coleman, 1996, p. 125)
  - vi. Prevalence in US
    1. 115,772 American same sex couples
    2. 1 in 3 female same sex couples are raising children (Belkin, 2009)
  - c. Resiliency among children without fathers
    - i. Definition of resilience:
    - ii. “Parentification refers to children or adolescents assuming adult roles before they are emotionally or developmentally ready to manage those roles successfully” (Stein, Riedel & Rotheram-Borus, 1999)
    - iii. Examples of positive outcomes
- IV. Hypothesis:
- a. Restatement of the Problem
  - b. Research Question/ *Hypothesis*: Disadvantaged children who do not have fathers present will be at risk for lower levels of self-esteem.
- V. Methodology
- a. Sample
    - i. *Type*: Convenience sampling
    - ii. *How Selected*: participant pool comes from families willing to participate who are enrolled in a governmentally subsidized preschool and social service agency in an urban New England setting.
    - iii. *Number*: 115 children, ages 3-5 participated in the study
  - b. Data Gathering
    - i. *Method*: data will be gathered from children enrolled in a governmentally subsidized preschool and case management program in various towns in Rhode Island. Participants will be chosen through convenience sampling by their ease of accessibility and willingness to participate.
    - ii. *Tools*: The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment questionnaire was administered and scored assessing the attachment, self-control, initiative and

behavior levels of each child. Data regarding demographics and levels of paternal presence were collected using agency files of each child and through interviews with knowledgeable family case managers.

- iii. *Variables*: For children- age, race, gender, father absence or presence, number of years of father absence or presence, male figure present in the home (if not the biological father), siblings, age of siblings, family income, self esteem rating.
- c. *Data Analysis*: To determine possible relationship, this information was synthesized into charts and analyzed using non-parametric correlations (Mann Whitney Test and Spearman's  $r$ ).
- d. *Findings/ Results*: Results showed that there was no significance between self-esteem ratings and paternal absence or presence.

## VI. Conclusion

- a. Implications for: (found in problem formulation)
  - i. *Social work practice* - Understanding any possible correlation between self esteem and father absence can inform social workers of risk factors involved in an attempt to do better work with clients in understanding the full breadth of issues surrounding a problem with low self esteem. A better informed practice will aid social workers in competently assessing situations and providing higher quality care to clients, which is required of social work professionals (according to the NASW Code of Ethics).
  - ii. *Research*-
    - 1. Due to the sample size of 115 children, the resulting data cannot be generalized to the greater population of children in early childhood. The sample included participants of both urban and suburban locations in Rhode Island with family incomes qualifying the child as "low-income". To yield more generalizable statistics, an increased sample size would be desirable including participants from various regions of the country, and a more racially diverse backgrounds.
    - 2. The use of the DECA questionnaire may have also proven to hinder results of the study. The validity for the instrument at rating self-esteem is in question. In future studies, utilizing a tool that more directly assesses the factors of self-esteem would be helpful in establishing more valid data.
  - iii. *Policy* - Support for policies surrounding reunification of the family can be strengthened by any results that point toward better social and mental health of children if their fathers are present. Also, further programs can be created that would support fathers in gaining better parenting skills to assist in more healthy family functioning

## INTRODUCTION

Economically disadvantaged children who do not have fathers present have shown to have lower levels of self esteem as compared to peers who do have fathers present (Pruett, 1987; Wineburgh, 2000; Glennon, 2002; Nock & Einolf, 2008; Beaty, 1995). Modern society has given rise to a number of varying family system shifts in recent years. An “intact” family, one in which both mother and father are present, is no longer the norm as alternative family structures have become more prevalent (Beaty, 1995). One major alternative family structure that continues to increase is that of paternal absence. Paternal absence or father absence can be defined as “families where a biological, adoptive, or stepfather does not live in the same household as the children” (Nock & Einolf, 2008). This absence can be due to death, divorce, career demands (military service for example), or separation. In these instances, the caregiver and guardian most often becomes the mother and results in a female-headed family. Problems occur when a child must grow and develop in an environment lacking paternal supports where he or she may harbor feelings of shame, doubt, and blame for the loss of the father in the home (What it means to be a father, 2007). These troubling feelings have shown to manifest into psychological and behavioral issues such as depression or developmental deficits if not properly addressed (Wineburgh, 2000). For children who undergo a loss of paternal presence before the age of five, the effects have been characterized as profound and long-term (Beaty, 1995). Furthermore, children who grow up living with never-married mothers are more likely to have been treated for emotional problems (Remez, 1992). The complex string of emotions surrounding the loss of paternal supports in a child’s life has been termed “father hunger”, where a child “experiences longing and desire for a male role model and attention” (Herzog, 1982, p. 165). Further feelings of rejection occur when subsequent males cannot fulfill the

child's emotional needs sufficiently which can result in lowered self esteem and self worth (Wineburgh, 2000). It has been proven that "fathers provide both economic and social capital to children that affects school-related behavior and academic achievement, career development, peer relationships, self esteem, and adult outcomes such as achievement, marital happiness, and strength of social networks" (Krampe & Newton, 2006, p. 160). Due to the previous research conducted surrounding the effects of children living in fatherless homes, this study will address the levels of self esteem and security in children with absent fathers. Being able to identify a correlation between the two variables of absent fathers and self esteem of children would be important in understanding key links to emotional well being and health of children.

Father absence has risen greatly over the past four decades. Between 1960 and 2006, "the number of children living without fathers in single-mother homes grew from 8 percent to 23.3 percent, while 34 percent of children currently do not live with their biological fathers" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2007 as cited in Nock & Einolf, 2008, p. 3). According to the 2005 U.S. Census Bureau "there are approximately 13.6 million single parents in the United States, and those parents are responsible for raising 21.2 million children" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Of these families, 84 percent are custodial mothers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). In addition, approximately half of divorces involve families with at least one child, which affects about one million children a year (Fields, 2003).

With attention to the aforementioned emotional burdens that have been established with children from absent father homes, the current number of children effected is overwhelming. Understanding any possible correlation between self esteem and father absence can inform social workers of risk factors involved in an attempt to do better work with clients in understanding the

full breadth of issues surrounding a problem with low self esteem. A better informed practice will aid social workers in competently assessing situations and providing higher quality care to clients, which is required of social work professionals. In response, informed treatment recommendations can be made with children of father absent families to safeguard against potential self blame, lessening of self esteem, behavioral problems, or other negative emotional effects that have been previously studied. This information can be used to help maintain a healthy emotional environment for children in this population as they are vulnerable due to their inability to advocate for themselves and draw attention to this potential issue. Feelings of self esteem and self worth are vital to the healthy development of a child. In maintaining the objectives of National Association of Social Workers, protecting and advocating for vulnerable populations is essential for proper growth and development of society.

The outcome or finding of this study could raise a flag to the roots of emotional health concerns, such as low self esteem in children, and support further research efforts to locate more profound environmental concerns to protect this vulnerable population. Gaining the basic understanding that this first study may provide may open doors for further research to explore the complex connection of child-father relationships and the meaning they may have on the overall well-being of the family system.

Support for policies surrounding reunification of the family can be strengthened by any results that point toward better social and mental health of children if their fathers are present. Also, further, higher quality programs can be created that would support fathers in gaining better parenting skills to assist in more healthy family functioning.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Father Absence*

The family structure of a home with father absence can be operationalized as a family where the father is not present in the same household as the children (Nock & Einolf, 2008). A partial absence of a father has been termed for a living situation where the father may live in a separate household due to divorce, separation, or otherwise, yet still maintains frequent contact with the child (KIDS COUNT, 2009). A father who lacks contact with a child due to death, incarceration, or abandonment is termed as fully absent (KIDS COUNT, 2009). The prevalence of partial absence is alarmingly frequent, as nationally it has been cited that approximately 40 percent of children in father absent homes have not seen their biological fathers in the past year, while another 50 percent of children in father absent homes have never entered the actual home of their father (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2004, as cited in U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). Even with a father's frequent contact, the quality of the physical attendance may not be measured as being responsibly present in the child life. Fathers who cannot fulfill certain responsibilities as a parent can be considered "physically present but technically absent" (LaRossa & LaRossa, 1989). A responsible father, as defined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "waits to make a baby until he is prepared emotionally and financially, establishes legal paternity, actively shares the continuing emotional and physical care of the child, and shares continual financial support of the child from pregnancy onward" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1998, as cited in Children's Trust Fund, 2004).

The incidence of homes lacking paternal presence, as aforementioned, has grown exponentially in recent history. Nationally, in 2005, 12.9 million families consisted of single

parents raising one or more children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Of these families, 10.4 million were single mothers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Nationally, this accounted for more than 21 million children living in single parent homes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). Rhode Island families are no exception to this phenomenon. Of the 228,391 Rhode Island children, 67,978 are living in single parent homes, which is a total of 30 percent of children state wide (KIDS COUNT, 2009).

This increase in absent fathers can also be attributed to many environmental factors. Since the 1950's, there has been a steady increase in the number of children born to unmarried mothers (Wineburgh, 2000). Children who are born into family structures where the mother is unwed yet cohabitates with the child's father are three times more likely to experience father absence, while children born to unwed, non-cohabitating parents are four times as likely to experience father absence during their childhood (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). The prevalence of adults marrying later in life or forgoing marriage by opting for cohabitation has risen, which again results in higher prevalence of births to single women, at about 34 percent (Nock & Einolf, 2008). Furthermore, a high divorce rate (of 5.4 percent in 2005) leaves many families with children involved in custodial agreements where mothers are more frequently granted guardianship (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). The stress and painful emotions that accompany divorce may at times be a factor in alienating a father from his children (What It Means to be a Father, 2007). Also, 43 percent of first marriages have been cited to result in divorce within the first 15 years. Of these divorces, 60 percent involve children, the majority of which are under the age of 18 (U.S. Department of Health and Humans Services). In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, popularity has grown with single women who chose to adopt a child or become pregnant through artificial insemination (Wineburgh, 2000). Another factor is



the intense pressure that fathers may feel assuming the role as the child's main source of financial support. Fathers may harbor false ideas about this role and believe that his only parental responsibility is monetary. A father feeling that he may not be able to meet the societal expectations of this financially centered role may flee the situation, especially if he already is of low income status (What It Means to be a Father, 2007). However, this is not to say that individuals in poverty do not value marriage and commitment, as they aspire to marriage at the same rate as the rest of the American population (KIDS COUNT, 2009). Although, individuals in poverty have shown to have barriers to marriage of low income men due to low educational achievement, substance abuse, mental health concerns, and high rate of incarceration (KIDS COUNT, 2009).

For children who grow in families where the father is not present, the implications can be severe to their mental and emotional health. Children who are born into father absent homes are at greater risk for undesirable outcomes due to the lacking social, emotional, and financial resources that are not present (McLanahan, 1995). For children who have constant contact with their fathers in a responsible and appropriate manner, the ability to take initiative and gain self control is present, while they also exhibit greater coping and adaptation skills (Pruett, 1987). Furthermore, children also are better equipped to handle emotional, stressful situations and empathy if they have had an involved father (Pleck, 1997). Further research has yielded that children with fathers present do better in school, are less prone to violence, and have better mental health such as self esteem and self confidence (Children's Trust Fund, 2004; What It Means to be a Father, 2007).

### *Self-Esteem*

The most accurate definition of self-esteem has been debated by psychologists, as it covers a wide range of emotions and behaviors. Rosenberg (1965) provided the most widely used, yet broad, definition of self-esteem, which describes it as “a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward the self” (Rosenberg, 1965, as cited in Adler & Stewart, 2004). Further definitions have amended this to include additions of attitudes toward capabilities and feelings of love understood by the individual (Sheslow, 2008). The importance of such attitudes toward the self can be crucial links to mental health conditions involving “social and emotional milestones made my making secure attachments, satisfying social relationships, and effective coping skills” (KIDS COUNT, 2009, p. 54). These negative attitudes toward the self are detrimental to the functioning and achievement of social emotional development in all stages of life (Sheslow, 2008).

Self-esteem in early childhood is of extreme importance as it cultivates healthy attitudes surrounding foundational learning and experiences. Self-esteem has shown to have a strong relation to overall happiness (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003). Children with high levels of self-esteem have shown to exhibit many healthy qualities that work to advance their social, emotional, and academic standings. Such behaviors of children with high self-esteem include taking responsibility for one’s own actions, acting independently, taking pride in one’s accomplishments, tolerating frustration, handling peer pressure appropriately, attempting new tasks and challenges, and offering assistance to others (U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services, 2002). Appropriate use of such coping mechanisms in early childhood has shown to lead to growth and mastery of milestones (Brooks, 2008). These foundations begin in infancy as children develop strong attachments for the individuals who care for them, as they become their

natural supporters of life (Katz, 1996). From this beginning bond, children develop trust for individuals that are responsible for their healthy cultivation and gradually feelings of being wanted and valued emerge. In addition, children with high self-esteem are more likely to have an understanding that adults that are important to them (especially parents) accept them, care about their well-being, and would actively ensure their safety (Katz, 1996). Children desire the assurance that these important adults would miss them or become upset if they were separated at the same rate that the child would long for the adult (Katz, 1996).

The risks associated with enduring low levels of self-esteem are broad and differ situationally. Many people with self-esteem deficiencies may be “depicted as uncertain and confused about themselves, oriented toward avoiding risk and potential loss, shy, modest, submitting readily to other peoples influence, and lacking confidence in themselves” (Baumeister, Bush & Campbell, 2000, p. 27). The associated effects of poor self-attitudes may also include a tendency to be overly critical of the self and works produced and a propensity to give up easily on tasks that may not prove to be outside of the individual’s capacity (Sheslow, 2008). In such cases, individuals with low self-esteem understand “temporary setbacks as permanent and intolerable conditions” which lead to an attitude of pessimism (Sheslow, 2008).

The effects of low self-esteem in childhood appears to be an enduring phenomenon, as the consequences may manifest into further social, emotional, and behavioral concerns in later stages of life. Emotionally, lowered self-esteem has been directly linked to outcomes of depressive symptoms over time (Roberts, Gotlib & Kassel, 1996). Also, lowered self-esteem is linked to feelings of inferiority and shame which can be externalized by blaming others and result in “feelings of hostility and anger toward others” whom are deemed responsible (Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005, p. 328). Feelings of inferiority

caused by rejection and humiliation that are built in early childhood experiences at times can result in aggression and antisocial behaviors (Horney, 1950 & Adler, 1956 as cited in Donnellan, Trzesniewski, Robins, Moffitt, & Caspi, 2005, p. 328).

### *Economically Disadvantaged Children*

The issue of poverty directly affects individuals in early childhood as they are of a vulnerable population and lack the ability to provide for themselves if adults are incapable of doing so. Economically disadvantaged children are the “percentage of children under the age of 18 who are living in households with incomes below the poverty threshold”, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau (KIDS COUNT, 2009). The federal poverty threshold maintains the income that families must earn before they are eligible for many governmentally funded welfare benefits. In 2009, the poverty threshold for a family of three in a single parent home was set at \$18,310 and the threshold for a family of four with two dependent children was \$22,050 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2009).

The use of a measurement for the federal poverty threshold has introduced many conflicts in evaluating a family’s needs based on a standardized assessment, which in turn may be a root to the problem of poverty in the United States. A main concern is that this method of calculation has not been adjusted since its initial development in 1963-1964 by Mollie Orshanski as part of the Social Security Administration’s effort to accurately measure the nation’s state of poverty. The measurements were based on the cheapest food plans as established by the Department of Agriculture. More than 40 years later, this tool is in continued use although the prices of childcare, housing, transportation, and medical care have inflated over time (KIDS COUNT, 2009). The inaccuracy of this tool has been studied by the Poverty Institute of Rhode Island, which has developed a 2008 Standard of Need report. This study revealed that a three-member

family earning 175% of the federal poverty threshold (\$30,800 annually) will *still* fall short of affording basic needs by \$48 per month (KIDS COUNT, 2009). This tool thus proves to be an inaccurate measure of the state of economic need of individuals, which leads to various sacrifices and deprivations the family must endure.

The effects of poverty on children cover a wide expanse of functioning and need. Risk factors associated with children in poverty include inadequate nutrition, maternal depression, trauma and abuse, and parental substance abuse (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2002). Parents in poverty frequently lack the knowledge of available resources for health care and insurance due to isolation, which impacts the health of a child as they do not receive frequent check-ups from a physician or dentist. Children who do not receive proper preventative care will be more likely to endure illnesses that can become life long problems, such as ear infections leading to deafness (North Carolina Public Health, 2009). Furthermore, children who live in poverty are more likely to have health and behavioral concerns, difficulty in school, become teen parents, and become unemployed as adults (Moore & Redd, 2002). These factors interfere with a child's social and emotional developments, which are crucial in the years of early childhood in forming a foundation for further growth.

Children without fathers tend to be included in the statistics of families that fall below the poverty level. This can be attributed to many factors, especially the loss of income that occurs due to the loss of an adult to contribute to the family finances.

## OPPOSING POINTS

### *Absence of stigma and child development*

Although much evidence has been cited supporting the positive impact of father presence upon children's functioning, specific instances and situations can yield results that are not

concurrent with the previous data. Children may still function normally without father presence under conditions where father absence is not viewed as veering from the normal family structure (Coleman, 1996). The stigma, or mark of social disgrace, that at times accompanies the lack of a father in a family can produce negative experiences for the child which can be destructive to the child's development. However, in communities and locations where father absence is so prevalent that it becomes the norm, these stigmas are not attached to this family structure and the family does not experience the same social impact (Coleman, 1996). The places where father absence lacks such a stigma include communities of poor Blacks in the United States, the Caribbean, Brazil, and the Caribbean coast of Central America (Austin, 1989, as cited in Coleman, 1996). In these situations "father absence has a negative impact on achievement only among groups where middle-class values are the accepted norm" (Heatherington, 1983, as cited in Coleman, 1996, p. 124). Black children in United States housing projects have illustrated similar results where children who had fathers who were absent did not test lower in academic achievement or social functioning as compared to their peers who had fathers who were present (Herzog & Sudia, 1973; Wasserman, 1972, as cited in Coleman 1996). Furthermore, in sex role development, Black children residing in inner city settings did not show that father absence was a factor, but in many cases these family structures included an older male figure in place of the biological father (Heatherington, 1983, as cited in Coleman, 1996).

#### *Benefits of non-biological present adults: Gay Parenting*

Child development has proven to advance normally in family structures where neither parent is male, such of a family consisting of lesbian parents. "Responsible parenting can occur within a variety of family structures" as neither the mother nor the father are essential to child development because "heterosexual marriage is not the only social context where responsible

parenting can occur” (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). Neither a mother nor the father is essential as long as children have at least one responsible, dependable, caring guardian who has a positive emotional connection and a consistent relationship (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). The sex of neither of the parents “has emerged as a significant variable” in predicting positive child development (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). However, instead, the strongest indicators for positive child adjustment have been shown to be an emotional connection and predictability of the care taker relationship (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). In this way, parenting roles can be interchangeable where neither the mother nor the father are unique or necessary to healthy development and adjustment as gay and lesbian parents can create positive family unit.

Children raised by lesbians without a male figure or father present are just as well adjusted socially and emotionally as children with fathers present (Belkin, 2009; Grohol, 2009; NARTH, 2008). An all female parenting system raising children, without the assistance of males, can tend to “be more involved in the children’s lives” and can be in “greater harmony in terms of parenting approaches” (NARTH, 2008). Females raised by lesbians are more likely to have high aspirations for professional careers such as doctors or lawyers compared to girls raised by heterosexual partners who more frequently want to be teachers or mothers (Belkin, 2009; Grohol, 2009). Males raised by lesbians show less aggressive tendencies and more nurturing characteristics than males raised by heterosexual partners. The positive outcomes of these children that are reared without biological or surrogate male figures illustrate that family contexts of father absence can yield positive results for children.

This type of family context is growing nationally due to greater social acceptance and emerging laws that protect the rights of lesbian and gay partners and their children. Currently in

the United States there are 115,772 same sex couples. Of these couples, 1 in 3 are female couples raising one or more children (Belkin, 2009).

### *The power of positive adult influences*

Although many children lack fathers in their family context, strong family networks provide a positive environment for growth and success. Strong family networks among Black children are common and provide support systems and friendship groups that provide access to resources and community reinforcement. In Black families, the rearing of children often includes the maternal grandmother as a consistent care taker. The extended family often provides financial support and assistance which can negate potential losses that father absence may encourage (Coleman, 1996). Furthermore, positive male influences can come from adults outside of the family system such as coaches, teachers, or childcare providers. The strength of the power these individuals has shown that the presence of a father is not as vital as “the importance of an individual who fills this role and all that it engenders” (Coleman, 1996, p.125). Older male siblings also have the same positive effect on younger siblings if responsibility, care, and consistency are present, just as with any adult in a child’s life.

### HYPOTHESIS

The increasing nature of father absence has brought attention to the consequences of this multidimensional phenomenon. Due to the various issues that compound responsible fatherhood practices, fathers experience barriers to fulfilling these parental duties and at times lack the ability to participate in the lives of their children. Furthermore, societal norms play a part in the social education of males as to what their paternal role entails. The factor of economic scarcity enters as resources may already be lacking for these families, and the absence of a paternal



resource impact the family system on social, emotional, and economic levels. The consequences for improper male attachment and attention that children endure have shown to have serious detrimental effects on self esteem and social functioning, especially if this occurs in infancy and early childhood during crucial years of social-emotional development.

However, further research has found contradictory results in attention to lesbian parenting and the typical development of children. This information has yielded results that the gender of the parents may not be the most critical variable, but the quality of the relationship in terms of predictability and permanency could prove to be of higher importance in terms of childhood development. Furthermore, both male and female role models, as surrogates to absent paternal roles, have again shown to provide a child with the appropriate social and emotional experiences to encourage well-adjusted growth.

This study will seek to uncover information regarding the self-esteem ratings of children with fathers categorized as absent from economically disadvantaged homes. In regards to overwhelming data on this subject, it is hypothesized that children from economically disadvantaged homes will have lower levels of self-esteem if the father is absent from the home. Absent in this study will be in the case of fully absent, or a father who lacks contact with a child due to death, incarceration, or abandonment (KIDS COUNT, 2009). The economic levels will be judged from the U.S Department of Health and Human Services 2009 Poverty Guidelines.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted using convenience sampling. The participant pool came from children who are enrolled in a governmentally subsidized pre-school and social service agency located in two semi-urban towns in Rhode Island. Data was gathered from 115 children enrolled in the classrooms of the aforementioned agency, which contain children from 3 to 5 years of age.

Parents of the children were notified and given informed consent forms prior to reviewing child files and granted the opportunity to withhold information (see Appendix A).

Children's levels of self-esteem were rated using The Devereux Early Childhood Assessment tool (henceforth referred to as DECA). The DECA meets professional standards for assessment instruments established by the American Psychological Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Thirty-seven hypothetical situations are assessed by the raters (completed by parents and by teachers) on a five point Likert-like scale with options of "Never", "Rarely", "Occasionally", "Frequently", and "Very Frequently". Samples of questions asked include "How often does your child fail to show joy or gladness at a happy occasion?", "How often does your child make decisions for him/herself?" and "How often does your child say positive/optimistic things about the future?" (in compliance with the copyrighted nature of the DECA questionnaire, a copy of the assessment tool cannot be replicated and presented in this study). The DECA questionnaire assesses a child's social and emotional health as well as skills in adaptation and resilience. The concept of self-esteem, as defined as an attitude toward one's own capabilities or a favorable or unfavorable attitude toward one's self, as a compounded issue concerns these levels of functioning in early childhood as a means of measuring these attitudes. The rating provides a composite score of initiative ("child's ability to use independent thought and action to meet his or her needs"), self control ("child's ability to experience a range of feelings and express them using the words and actions that society considers appropriate") and attachment ("measure of a mutual, strong, and long-lasting relationship between a child and significant adults") (Devereux, 2010). These scores together function as an assessment of the individual's attitude of capabilities and toward the self, thus yielding a self-esteem rating. The DECA has been assessed as a highly reliable instrument as

each of the alpha coefficients for the protective factor scales meets or exceeds the .80 “desirable standard” (Devereux, 2010).

Children’s family income will be rated according to documentation available in the child’s files regarding income eligibility for the agency’s programs. Information regarding paternal levels of involvement and level presence will be gathered through verification with knowledgeable and informed family case managers. The variables regarding children demographics include age, race, gender, father absence or presence, male figure present in the home (if not the biological father), siblings, age of siblings, and family income (see Appendix B).

### *Demographics*

Of the participants studied, 31.3% were 3 years of age, 61.7% were 4 years of age, and 7% were 5 years of age. In regards to the gender distribution of children sampled, 61.7% were male and 38.3% were female. In terms of racial backgrounds, 57.4% identified as “White alone”, 13% as “Black or African American”, 11.3% as “Hispanic or Latino”, 11.3% as children of “Two or more races”, 3.5% identified as “Other”, and 2.6% as “Asian”. According to the child’s approximate annual family income, 91.3% of participants were below the 2009 federal poverty threshold, while the remaining participants scored no more than 200% of the federal poverty level.

The family make up of the children studied consisted of 50.4% of participants that had fathers who lived in the home and 49.6% of participants did not have fathers present in the home. Of the children who do not have fathers who live in the home, 45.6% have frequent contact with their fathers, while 54.4% do not have frequent contact.

The majority of all children sampled were rated as “Typical” in areas of development such as initiative, behavior, attachment, and self-control by both the child’s parent and the child’s teacher. Ratings regarding the participants’ behavior were the only variable of the developmental set to reach higher “Concerning” levels, as reported by 27.5% of parents.

### *Data Analysis*

This data was analyzed by first looking at Spearman’s  $r$  for non-parametric correlations. When correlating the resulting data from whether the child’s father lives in the home or not, and the results of child’s self-esteem from the DECA questionnaires, no significance was found at  $r = .362$ .

**Table 1:** Spearman’s  $r$  for Non Parametric Correlations: Father Presence

|  | DECA Self-Esteem Result –<br>Parent Rating                            | DECA Self-Esteem Result –<br>Teacher Rating                           |
|--|---|---|
| “Does the biological, adoptive, or step father of the child live in the home?” | Correlation Coefficient: $-.054$<br>Sig. (2 tailed): $.569$<br>N: 115 | Correlation Coefficient: $-.086$<br>Sig. (2 tailed): $.362$<br>N: 115 |

Similar results were calculated for further variables of male involvement such as frequency of paternal contact, incidence of other male adults living in the child’s home, incidence of male siblings in the home with regards to both number of siblings, and age. For frequency of contact  $r = .642$  for the parent rating of the child’s self-esteem and  $r = .422$  for the teacher’s rating. In regards to the presence of another male adult in the home,  $r = .219$  for parent’s DECA results, and  $r = .124$  for teacher’s ratings. The presence of male siblings produced the results of  $r = .331$  for the parent DECA rating, and  $r = .452$  for the teacher’s rating.

**Table 2:** Spearman’s  $r$  for Non Parametric Correlations: Other Potentially Influential Factors

|  | DECA Self-Esteem Result – | DECA Self-Esteem Result – |
|--|---------------------------|---------------------------|
|--|---------------------------|---------------------------|

|   | Parent Rating  | Teacher Rating   |
|---|--|--|
| “If the biological, adoptive, or step father does not live in the home, does the child have frequent contact with him?” | Correlation Coefficient: .044<br>Sig. (2 tailed): .642<br>N: 115 | Correlation Coefficient: .076<br>Sig. (2 tailed): .422<br>N: 115 |
| “Other than the biological, adoptive, or step father, is there another <i>male</i> adult living in the home?”           | Correlation Coefficient: .115<br>Sig. (2 tailed): .219<br>N: 115 | Correlation Coefficient: .144<br>Sig. (2 tailed): .124<br>N: 115 |
| Presence of male siblings in the home   | Correlation Coefficient: .091<br>Sig. (2 tailed): .331<br>N: 115 | Correlation Coefficient: .071<br>Sig. (2 tailed): .452<br>N: 115 |

Further non-parametric tests were run, such as the Mann-Whitney Test, which also concluded that the variables did not show significance. Again the DECA ratings of parents and teachers were scored against the grouping variables representing paternal presence.

**Table 3:** Mann Whitney Test – Father Presence

|  |   | DECA Self-Esteem<br>Result – Parent Rating | DECA Self-Esteem<br>Result – Teacher Rating |
|--|---|--|---|
| “Does the biological, adoptive, or step father of the child live in the home?” | Mann Whitney U:<br>Wilcoxon W<br>Z<br><i>Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed)</i> | 1552.000<br>3205.000<br>-5.73<br>.556      | 1497.000<br>3150.000<br>-.917<br>.359       |

Very similar results were found again when analyzing other factors of male involvement and the subsequent self-esteem ratings of participants. Factors of incidence of other male adults living in the child’s home and incidence of male siblings in the home with regards to both number of siblings, and age were analyzed. From these variables, no significance was resulting.

**Table 4:** Mann Whitney Test – Father Presence

|  | DECA Self-Esteem<br>Result – Parent Rating | DECA Self-Esteem<br>Result – Teacher Rating |
|--|--|---|
|--|--|---|

|   |                               |          |          |
|---|-------------------------------|----------|----------|
| Presence of male siblings in the home   | Mann Whitney U:               | 1454.000 | 1497.000 |
|   | Wilcoxon W                    | 2729.000 | 2772.500 |
|   | Z                             | -.976    | -.756    |
|   | <i>Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed)</i> | .329     | .450     |
| “Other than the biological, adoptive, or step father, is there another <i>male</i> adult living in the home?” | Mann Whitney U:               | 941.500  | 901.000  |
|   | Wilcoxon W                    | 1266.500 | 1226.000 |
|   | Z                             | -1.188   | -1.519   |
|   | <i>Asymp. Sig. (2 tailed)</i> | .235     | .129     |

### *Findings*

The results of this study concluded that in regards to the DECA assessment of child self-esteem and the various factors of paternal presence, there was not any significance between these two variables. In the case of the parent’s ratings of child self-esteem and the teacher’s ratings, the results remained to present no significance to paternal involvement. The two variables of self-esteem and paternal presence or absence did not correlate with one another to refute the study’s hypothesis that the child’s would have lower self esteem if the there was not paternal presence (and there would be higher levels of self-esteem if there was paternal presence).

### CONCLUSION

Father absence is a highly charged topic in the debate surrounding its relation to the social and emotional development of children in early childhood. As previous studies have shown, damages to development in early years of life can solidify and be maintained in later years, severely impacting a child’s chances of success. Low self-esteem and further emotional maladjustments have previously been studied with their relation to unpredictable parenting patterns and instability of kinship connections. This is further related to economically disadvantaged families as they experience stress to family bonds as financial responsibilities of the father are heightened. Inversely, children that are reared in settings with responsible,

predictable adults have revealed comparable levels of resilience and typical social-emotional development, despite the gender of the adults involved. Understanding the roles that father's play in these developmental areas provides information regarding interventions necessary to ensure that children are provided with the opportunities for healthy emotional growth. It was hypothesized that economically disadvantaged children (ages 3-5) who do not have fathers that live in their homes or have frequent contact will have lower ratings of self-esteem, as tested using the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment. However, with the data collected, similar results were not evident in comparison to the aforementioned studies. The results instead exhibited no significance between the factors of parent and teacher rating of self-esteem when analyzed with factors of the father living in the home, another male adult present in the home, male siblings in the home (regardless of age), and if the child has frequent contact with the father.

#### *Implications for Social Work Practice*

An interesting finding from data collected in this study proved to combat the myth that children in low-income homes primarily are members of female-headed households where the father does not contribute. However, information retrieved has shown that in this population, while over 90% of children were below the federal poverty level, 50.4% of fathers resided in the home with the children. This data can be used to inform individuals of the misconception about the ignorant prejudices regarding "dead-beat dads", where fathers are thought to abandon their family and neglect parental roles. Eliminating this misconception can help to build a positive regard for fathers in this field, further empowering them to maintain their responsible practices as a father and caregiver.

Although results did not provide data on the relationship between father presence and child self-esteem, the social work profession is still responsible for promoting human relationships as the basis for supportive and predictable family structures. Best practices to include fathers in child welfare agencies would involve a multifaceted approach to shift agency culture and practices to a more holistic view of the family. As research in this area is fragmented and can provide contradictory results, the importance becomes unclear to professionals working in this field. The sizes of caseloads are often too large for an individual social worker to adequately assess each case and understand complex structures of the family systems. When the caseloads are too large and social workers are over extended, good work cannot be accomplished with the family in attending to all family needs and having the time to reach out to family members, such as fathers, that may not be easily located or easily engaged in the process. In an attempt to correct this disparity in treatment of fathers, social workers must cultivate more efficient organizational skills to find time to reach out and engage fathers as an important factor in the success of the children represented. Supervisors also must understand this as a standard of practice and encourage their co-workers to use such practices in the promotion of the dignity and rights of this population.

Furthermore, in addressing the issue of poor practices in involving fathers, education and training must focus more on the promotion of positive, strength based views of the father as a means of eradicating harmful stereotypes from agency culture. Social workers must understand the vitalness of the father in the promotion of human relationships and the rights of fathers to be included (as a part of social justice). In doing so, one must engage in a comprehensive assessment of family systems that include the strengths and needs of all family members. As the National Association of Social Workers calls for “social workers continually strive to increase



their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice”, gaining an appreciation for the significance of male involvement would result in more masterful work with individuals, groups, and families (NASW, 2008).

### *Implications for Social Work Research*

Due to the sample size of 115 children, the resulting data cannot be generalized to the greater population of children in early childhood. The sample included participants of both urban and suburban locations in Rhode Island with family incomes qualifying the child as “low-income”. To yield more generalizable statistics, an increased sample size would be desirable including participants from various regions of the country, and a more racially diverse backgrounds.

This study was also limited in the ways of data collection. Questionnaires collected quantitative data on the level of paternal involvement based only on numerical counts of time spent with the child. Several case managers interviewed for this data questioned this method as yielding appropriate information. It has been suggested that in future research, information regarding the *quality* of time spent between fathers and their children be recorded as a qualitative section. This information will provide results of active play, attention, and appropriateness of interactions between father and child to gain further insight into the beneficial nature of parent-child contact and ways to improve such contact.

The use of the DECA questionnaire may have also proven to hinder results of the study. The validity for the instrument at rating self-esteem is in question. In future studies, utilizing a tool that more directly assesses the factors of self-esteem would be helpful in establishing more valid data.

### *Implications for Social Policy*

Creating services and programs to address the needs and vulnerabilities of the father would be fundamental in understanding the complexity of the issue from the father's perspective. Again, although this study did not result in data to support the hypothesis that father absence negatively effect's child self-esteem, the acceptance of fathers in legislation is a crucial part of social justice for this population. This approach would involve policies and protocol in individual agencies and in larger federal bodies to embrace the importance of paternal involvement and create mandated procedure to ensure this population be given equal attention and respect. Regardless of the information provided with the use of this study, social work, as a holistic method of intervention, must include all levels of family contribution therefore embracing both the mother and the father of children in social service agencies. Policies that incorporate both highly influential members of the family will serve to provide a more comprehensive assessment of kinship functioning. In adherence to the National Association of Social Work Code of Ethics, it is vital that social workers advocate for policy that uphold the importance of human relationships they "seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the wellbeing of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities" (NASW, 1996). As attitudes and beliefs are altered, respect and trust can develop and guide future work in the direction of celebrating the vital role of the father in the formation of policy and protocol, rather remaining ignorant to its relevance.

## *Appendix A*

### Informed Consent for Social Work Research Participation

Dear Participant,

I am a senior social work major at Providence College and I have been working as an intern at [agency name removed for confidentiality] since January 2009. For my senior thesis I will be conducting research regarding self-esteem and family structure of children ages 3-5. A study will be conducted using data already recorded in your child's file. The information recorded will be entirely anonymous. No identifying information regarding your child, family, or agency will be revealed in any way in the subsequent research findings.

There are not anticipated risks involved in your family or your child's participation in this study. The benefits will involve a deeper understanding of child self-esteem that can be used to inform the social work profession in establishing more effective policies, practices, and further research. Upon completion of this study, your family may request the results through contacting the researcher.

If you would *not* like data from your child's file to be used in this anonymous study, please leave a message at [contact information removed] and state your child's full name and classroom. I appreciate your compliance and if you have any questions regarding the nature of the study please contact me at the same number as above.

Thank you,

Casey Kevorkian  
Providence College  
Department of Social Work

## Appendix B

### Self-Esteem and Paternal Involvement Questionnaire

#### Section I: Demographics

1. **Age of child when DECA was administered:** *circle one*  

|   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
2. **Gender:** Male Female
3. **Race of child:** *check one*  

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> White (alone)                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Black or African American |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic or Latino                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Two or more races         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian or Alaskan Native   | <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Asian                               |  |
4. **Number of male siblings in the home:** *circle one*  

|   |   |   |     |            |
|---|---|---|-----|------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 + | no sibling |
|---|---|---|-----|------------|
5. **Age of male siblings in the home:** *circle all that apply*  

|        |     |      |       |     |            |
|--------|-----|------|-------|-----|------------|
| Infant | 2-5 | 6-10 | 11-15 | 16+ | no sibling |
|--------|-----|------|-------|-----|------------|
6. **Annual Family income:**  

|  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> No income       | <input type="checkbox"/> \$15,001-20,000  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown         | <input type="checkbox"/> \$20,001-25,000  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$1- 5,000      | <input type="checkbox"/> \$25,001- 30,000 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$5,001-10,000  | <input type="checkbox"/> \$30,001-35,000  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> \$10,001-15,000 | <input type="checkbox"/> \$35,001+        |
7. **Is the income of the family considered below the 2010 federal poverty level?**  

|                              |                             |                                  |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
8. **Does the biological, adoptive, or step father of the child live in the home?**  

|                              |                             |                                  |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | <input type="checkbox"/> No | <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
9. **If the biological, adoptive, or step father does not live in the home, does the child have frequent contact with him?** Frequent is defined as contact on a weekly basis. Contact can be either meeting in person or via telephone.  

|   |
|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, there is frequent contact                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> No, there is not frequent contact                          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown frequency of contact                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> This question does not apply/I answered YES to question #8 |
10. **Other than the biological, adoptive, or stepfather, is there another male adult living in the home?** Examples include but are not limited to uncle, grandfather, boyfriend of mother, friend of the family, etc.  

|  |
|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Yes, there is another male adult in the home    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> No, there is not another male adult in the home |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unknown   |

## Section II: DECA Results

| Parent/Guardian Assessment |          |         | Date:   | Teacher Assessment |          |         | Date:   |
|----------------------------|----------|---------|---------|--------------------|----------|---------|---------|
|                            | Strength | Typical | Concern |                    | Strength | Typical | Concern |
| Initiative                 |          |         |         | Initiative         |          |         |         |
| Attachment                 |          |         |         | Attachment         |          |         |         |
| Self-Control               |          |         |         | Self-Control       |          |         |         |
| Behavior                   |          |         |         | Behavior           |          |         |         |

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