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# MAMA SAYS: A National Survey of Mothers' Attitudes on Fathering



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## ABOUT NATIONAL FATHERHOOD INITIATIVE

National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI), founded in 1994, works in every sector and at every level of society to engage fathers in the lives of their children. NFI is one of the leading producers of research on the causes and consequences of father absence, public opinion on family issues, and trends in family structure and marriage. NFI's flagship research publication, *Father Facts*, is the leading source of fatherhood information and statistics for the press, public policy experts, and government officials. NFI's *Pop's Culture: A National Survey of Dads' Attitudes on Fathering* and *With This Ring: A National Survey on Marriage in America* are two of the most comprehensive national surveys that have been published in recent years on American attitudes towards fatherhood and marriage.

NFI's national public service advertising campaign promoting father involvement has generated television, radio, print, Internet, and outdoor advertising valued at over \$500 million. Through its resource center, FatherSOURCE™, NFI offers a wide range of innovative resources to assist fathers and organizations interested in reaching and supporting fathers. Through its "three-e" strategy of educating, equipping, and engaging, NFI works with businesses, prisons, churches, schools, community-based organizations, hospitals, and military installations to connect organizations and fathers with the resources they need to ensure that all children receive the love, nurture, and guidance of involved, responsible, and committed fathers.

For more information on the contents of this report, or for general information about NFI, call 301-948-0599 or visit [www.fatherhood.org](http://www.fatherhood.org).

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Barbara Dafoe Whitehead has written widely on family, fatherhood and child well-being for such publications as the Atlantic Monthly, New York Times, Wall Street Journal and the Washington Post. She is the author of *The Divorce Culture: Rethinking Our Commitments to Marriage and the Family* (1997) and *Why There Are No Good Men Left: The Romantic Plight of the New Single Woman* (2003). Her 1993 Atlantic Monthly article, "Dan Quayle Was Right" won an EMMA award from the National Women's Political Caucus and was recently reprinted in the 150-year retrospective, *The American Idea: The Best of the Atlantic Monthly*.

A co-director of Rutgers' National Marriage Project for nine years, Whitehead is the newly named founding director of the John Templeton Center for Thrift and Generosity at the Institute for American Values. For the next few years, she will be exploring the effects of overindebtedness on family stability and economic security.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**A national survey of 1,533 American mothers, age 18 and older, completed late in 2008, asked a series of questions concerning attitudes about fatherhood and the parenting performance of fathers. This survey is a follow-up to Pop's Culture: A National Survey of Dad's Attitudes on Fathering, released by NFI in 2006. Many of the same questions that were asked of the fathers in Pop's Culture were asked in this survey, and comparisons of the findings are discussed in this executive summary and throughout the report. This survey yielded the following key findings:**

**"93% of the respondents to the mothers survey agreed (67% strongly) that there is a father-absence crisis in the United States today."**

**1** The mothers' appraisals of the performance of fathers differed greatly according to whether or not the mother was married to or lived with the father. The mothers who lived with the fathers, including those cohabiting but not married, gave overwhelmingly high marks to the fathers, while those mothers not living with the fathers reported, on average, extremely negative views.

**2** Despite an overall favorable evaluation of fathers by the married and cohabiting mothers, a majority of them agreed that they could achieve a better work-family balance if the fathers provided more support.

**3** The mothers not living with the fathers reported very low satisfaction with the fathers who had taken on new romantic, marital, or stepfather relationships. With each additional relationship or responsibility, the survey shows, these mothers were progressively less satisfied with the fathers' parenting.

**4** African-American mothers reported lower satisfaction with fathers than did the white mothers and gave the fathers lower marks

on all but one of the evaluation questions. However, all of these differences can be totally or largely explained by the fact that a substantially smaller percentage of the black than of the white mothers were married to or lived with the fathers.

**5** The survey yielded evidence that strong religious beliefs, values, and commitments are conducive to good fathering whether or not the father lives with the mother.

**6** The mothers reported less satisfaction with the fathers of teenage children than with the fathers of younger children. Only 28 percent of the mothers of teenage offspring reported that the father-child relationship was "very close and warm," compared with 38 percent for children ages 6-12, and 57 percent for those ages 0-5.

**7** Aside from whether or not the mothers were married to or lived with the fathers, the two strongest predictors of the mothers' overall satisfaction with the fathers were (a) how close the mothers perceived the fathers to be to the child and (b) how well they thought the fathers balanced work and family.

**8** In the case of parents who lived with the child's other parent, there was little difference between the respondents to the mothers and the fathers surveys in regard to reports of the adequacy of time fathers spent with the child and of the quality of fathers' parenting skills. However, the fathering of nonresident fathers was evaluated much more positively, in the aggregate, by those fathers than by the mothers who co-parented with such men.

**9** The mothers married to the fathers were substantially more likely to agree with the

statement that “men perform best as fathers if they are married to the mothers of their children” than either mothers cohabiting with the fathers or those not living with them. Overall, 68 percent of the mothers agreed with this statement.

A majority of the mothers agreed that a mother or another man could be an adequate substitute for an absent or uninvolved father, with twice as large a percentage of the mothers not living with the fathers agreeing that fathers are replaceable. It is not clear, however, whether these respondents thought that adequate substitution for fathers is likely or common.

Ninety-three percent of the respondents to the mothers survey agreed (67 percent strongly) that there is a father absence crisis in the United States today. This is very similar to the 91 percent of the respondents to the fathers survey who agreed (62 percent strongly) that there is such a crisis.

Asked to rate the importance of 12 likely obstacles to good fathering, the mothers as a whole considered “work responsibilities” the most important, “father’s relationship with his own father” second, and “father’s lack of knowledge about how to be a good father” third in importance. The mothers living with the fathers assigned more importance to work responsibilities than did the others, but this obstacle was emphasized by mothers at all educational levels, of all degrees of religiosity, and of all races—an indication that work-family conflict is a ubiquitous problem for American fathers.



The mothers not living with the fathers were more likely than those living with the fathers to assign importance to 10 of the 12 obstacles to good fathering. Especially large were the differences in assigning importance to “lack of knowledge about how to be a good father” (59 versus 29 percent) and to “lack of parenting resources designed specifically for fathers” (46 versus 25 percent).

Asked to rate the importance of six possible places that might help fathers be better dads, the respondents as a whole placed the most importance on “churches and other communities of faith,” followed closely by schools, then by “community-based organizations.” The highest rating (“very important”) was given frequently to “churches...” even by those respondents who said that they were “not at all religious” (58 percent) and “not very religious” (72 percent).

### **These findings, considered along with other research & information, lead to the following major conclusions:**

- Mothers believe that stable, well-functioning marriages are extremely important for good fathering and responsible fatherhood. Public policies and private efforts, that successfully promote healthy marriages, will also contribute to good fathering.
- The large proportion of mothers, who think that mothers or other males can adequately substitute for absent or uninvolved fathers is cause for concern, because those beliefs are likely to contribute to father absence and lack of father involvement.
- In view of the evidence that work-family conflicts are ubiquitous obstacles to good fathering, affecting even many fathers in subpopulations in which obstacles to good fathering are generally rather weak, promoters of responsible fatherhood should give major attention to work-family conflicts.

# INTRODUCTION



**“Many of the more important findings from the Mama Says Survey are discussed in this report, and some are compared with similar findings from the Pop’s Culture Survey.”**

In 2006, National Fatherhood Initiative sponsored a telephone survey of 701 fathers selected to be representative of American fathers of children under 18 years of age who were themselves at least 18 years old (the Pop’s Culture Survey). The survey was designed to assess the fathers’ perceptions of obstacles to good fathering, to measure their attitudes about fatherhood in general, and to explore their own experiences with fathering, their perceptions of the adequacy of their parenting, the nature

of their relationship with their children, and resources that they had used, and that they felt they needed, to aid them with their fathering. The results of the survey are reported in *Pop’s Culture: A National Survey of Dad’s Attitudes about Fatherhood*, authored by Norval Glenn and David Popenoe and posted on the NFI website ([www.fatherhood.org/research.asp](http://www.fatherhood.org/research.asp)). As stated in the introduction to that report, the ultimate purpose of the survey was “to provide promoters of responsible fatherhood with information about how they can more effectively accomplish their task.”

Late in 2008, another NFI sponsored survey was completed that had the same ultimate goal as the Pop’s Culture Survey, but its respondents were mothers rather than fathers. This survey, titled the Mama Says Survey, was conducted online and elicited completed questionnaires from a roughly representative sample of 1,533 American mothers with children under age 18 who were themselves at least 18 years old. Other surveys have asked mothers about their own experiences with motherhood and their relations with their children, but the NFI survey focused instead on the mothers’ perceptions and evaluations of the fathers of their children and on the mothers’ views about fatherhood, giving a different perspective on many of the same topics covered by the Pop’s Culture Survey. The fathers’ views of their parenting are almost certainly biased and self-serving to some degree, and while the mothers’ views are also likely to be somewhat biased, the two perspectives together should provide a more accurate portrait of objective reality than would either alone. Many of the more important findings from the Mama Says Survey are discussed in this report, and some are compared with similar findings from the Pop’s Culture Survey.

The Mama Says Survey asked each respondent to think of her biological or adoptive child under age 18 with the most recent birthday. In this report, that child is called the “focal child,” and all responses about the father relate to the father of that child.<sup>1</sup>

*Details of the survey design are given in the Technical Appendix.*



# THE MOTHERS' EVALUATIONS OF THE PARENTING OF THEIR CHILDREN'S FATHERS

The mothers' views of the performance of the fathers can best be described as mixed and polarized, with substantial proportions of the mothers giving both very positive and very negative evaluations. For instance, the most common response to a question about satisfaction with the father's parenting was "very satisfied" (37 percent), but the second most frequent was "very dissatisfied" (25 percent). Overall, the responses to the evaluation questions tended to be more positive than negative, with positive evaluations varying from around a half to around two-thirds, except for the responses to

one question (see the last column in Table 1). The one exception, a question about whether or not the mother could achieve a better work-family balance if she had more support from the father, elicited agree responses (negative evaluations of the fathers' support) from a substantial majority of the mothers (see the last row in Table 1).

Arguably the most important aspect of the data on the mothers' evaluations of the fathers' parenting is the huge difference in the evaluations according to whether or not the mothers were living with the fathers (see Tables 1 through 3). The mothers living

"...the most important aspect of the data... is the huge difference in the evaluations according to whether or not the mothers were living with the fathers."

	<b>Married (820)</b>	<b>Co-habiting (97)</b>	<b>Not Living Together (530)</b>	<b>TOTAL (1,446)</b>
<b>Percent Who...</b>				
Were very or somewhat satisfied with father's performance	<b>84</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>62</b>
Said that time father spent with child was adequate or more than adequate	<b>75</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>56</b>
Said that relationship of father and child was very or moderately close and warm	<b>89</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>Strongly or somewhat agreed that:</b>				
I feel that the father of my child has all of the necessary skills to be a good father.	<b>83</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>69</b>
In general, the father of my child is a better father than my own father was.	<b>62</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>50</b>
The father of my child effectively balances work and family.	<b>73</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>54</b>
I could achieve better work/family balance if I had additional support from the father of my child.	<b>61</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>66</b>

TABLE 1. Mother's Attitudes Toward the Parenting of the Focal Child's Father, by Relationship between Mother and Father — In Percent ("Not sure" and similar responses are excluded from the base for the percentages. Minimum number of respondents for each category is given in parentheses.)

	<b>Married to or lived with father (967)</b>	<b>Did not live with father (565)</b>	<b>TOTAL (1,532)</b>
<b>Degree of satisfaction or dissatisfaction</b>			
Very satisfied	54	9	37
Somewhat satisfied	31	14	25
Somewhat dissatisfied	10	16	13
Very dissatisfied	5	61	26
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

TABLE 2. Mother’s Satisfaction (Dissatisfaction) with Father of Focal Child, by Whether or Not She Lived with Father— In Percent (Number of respondents for each category is given in parentheses.)

	<b>Married to or lived with father (967)</b>	<b>Did not live with father (565)</b>	<b>TOTAL (1,532)</b>
<b>Degree or lack of closeness and warmth</b>			
Very close and warm	56	15	41
Moderately close and warm	33	19	28
Distant and unemotional	3	47	19
Somewhat tense	7	13	9
Very tense	1	7	3
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

TABLE 3. Mother’s Report of Closeness (Lack of Closeness) of Father to Focal Child, by Whether or Not She Lived with Father— In Percent (Number of respondents for each category is given in parentheses.)

with the fathers (including those cohabiting but not married) gave overwhelmingly high marks to the fathers, except in response to the question about need for more support, while those not living with the fathers reported, on average, extremely negative views of the fathers’ performance. These differences are substantial for all of the evaluation questions, except, again, for the need-for-support question, and some can only be described as huge. For instance, differences as great as those for expressed satisfaction and reported closeness to the child shown in Tables 2 and 3 are extremely rare in survey research.

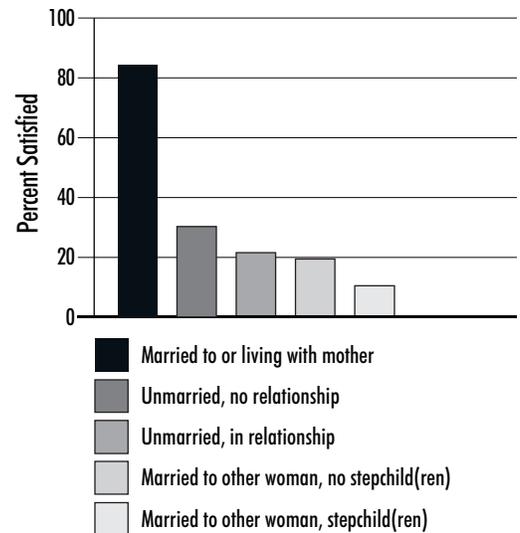
In view of the fact that the mothers not living with the fathers were in most cases evaluating ex-husbands or ex-lovers, hostility from sources other than the fathers’ parenting may have influenced their views of that parenting. However, there are many reasons for thinking that the parenting of fathers not living with their children (which, in this sample, includes all of those not living with the mothers) is objectively poorer on average than that of resident fathers, and according to the findings of the Pop’s Culture Survey, nonresident fathers themselves tend to perceive substantially greater

obstacles to their being good parents than do resident fathers. The physical separation, lack of daily contact, and in many cases lack of a cooperative relationship with the mother are probably the main reasons why nonresident fathers as a whole perform relatively poorly, but the formation of new intimate relationships and the assumption of new family responsibilities seem to be involved as well. The data in Figure 1 show progressively less mothers' satisfaction with the fathers with each additional relationship or responsibility, with the percentage being satisfied being about three times as great when the fathers were unmarried and had no romantic relationship as when they were married to someone other than the mother and had a stepchild or stepchildren.

The father's family situation (represented by the categories in Figure 1) is by far the strongest predictor of the mother's satisfaction with the father, of the mother's perception of how close the father was to his child, and of the responses to all of the other evaluation questions except the one about need for greater support from the father. However, the evaluations also differ appreciably by race, mother's education, mother's religiosity, and age of the focal child (see Figures 2 through 5 for data on mother's satisfaction). An important question is, to what extent are the differences in responses by other variables explained by variation in father's family situation? For instance, are the evaluations of the African American mothers less positive on the average than those of the white mothers only because the former are less likely to live with the fathers of their children? Or are there other important reasons for the apparent average low quality of the African American fathers' parenting?

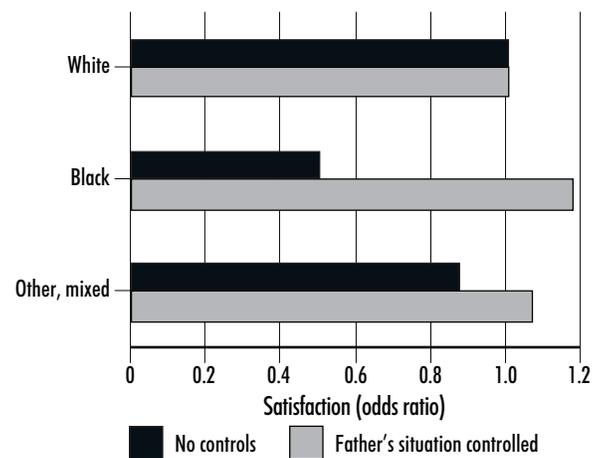
**"The father's family situation (see Figure 1) is by far the strongest predictor of the mother's satisfaction with the father, and of the mother's perception of how close the father was to his child..."**

Answering this question requires multivariate analyses of the responses, whereby father's family situation is statistically controlled, or held constant, and the remaining variation in the responses is examined. For this report, we used a statistical technique called logistic regression to accomplish these tasks, which produced statistics called odds ratios. Fortunately, it is not necessary for the reader to understand logistic regression or to know the meaning of the term "odds ratio" to interpret the results of the analyses, which are reported in Figures 2 through 5.



**FIGURE 1. Percent of Mothers Satisfied with the Parenting of the Father of the Focal Child, by Father's Family Situation**

Rather, it is only necessary to know that the value of the odds ratio for one of the compared categories (designated the "reference category") is set at 1.0, and the odds ratios for the other categories have meaning only in relation to that value. For instance, in Figure 2, whites are the reference category, for whom the odds ratio is set at 1.0. Before controls



**FIGURE 2. Mothers' Average Satisfaction with the Fathers of Their Children, by Mother's Race**

are applied, the odds ratio for blacks is approximately .5, which means that satisfaction expressed by blacks was about half of that expressed by whites.

However, when the estimated effects of white-black differences in father’s family situation are removed by the control procedures, the value for blacks is similar to, but somewhat higher than, that for whites. In other words, the fact that the family situations of the black fathers differed substantially from those of the white fathers seems to be the only reason for the large black-white difference in the survey respondents’ expressed satisfaction with the fathers of their children.

We do not report data comparable to those in Figure 2 on the other evaluation variables, but the data in Table 4 show that most of the black-white differences in the other variables are statistically explained by the fact that a much smaller percentage of the black mothers were living with the fathers

of their children. The black-white differences shown in the “total” column of the table are all substantial, but most of those in the first two columns, representing parents who were and who were not living together, are small or nonexistent. One of the latter differences is opposite the total one, the black fathers being reported closer on average to the focal child than the white fathers among those not living with the mothers—a difference partly explained by a smaller proportion of the black fathers being married to women other than the mothers. Given that the question comparing the respondents’ own fathers with the fathers of their children does not provide an absolute evaluation of the latter, the only question that shows a black disadvantage within the residence categories is the one about needing greater support from the fathers, the responses to which are less favorable from the black respondents by a degree unlikely to have resulted from chance.

	Married or Cohabiting		Not Living Together		TOTAL	
	White (700)	Black (116)	White (301)	Black (175)	White (1,001)	Black (291)
<b>Percent Who...</b>						
Were very or somewhat satisfied with father’s performance	84	84	21	27	66	49
Said that time father spent with child was adequate or more than adequate	76	76	24	24	60	44
Said that relationship of father and child was very or moderately close and warm	89	89	30	40	72	59
<b>Strongly or somewhat agreed that:</b>						
I feel that the father of my child has all of the necessary skills to be a good father.	83	80	44	47	71	60
In general, the father of my child is a better father than my own father was.	63	75	20	29	50	46
The father of my child effectively balances work and family.	73	75	20	23	57	43
I could achieve better work/family balance if I had additional support from the father of my child.	59	71	71	78	62	75

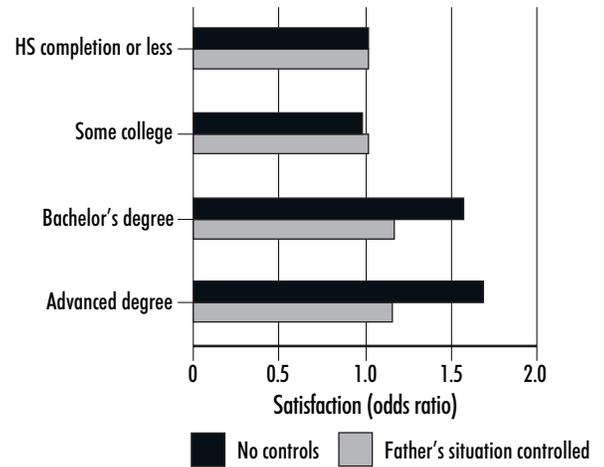
TABLE 4. Mother’s Attitudes about the Parenting of the Focal Child’s Father, by Race and Whether or Not Mother and Father Were Living Together — In Percent (“Not sure” and similar responses are excluded from the base for the percentages. Minimum number of respondents for each category is given in parentheses.)

**“These findings clearly indicate that the relatively poor average performance of the African American fathers, as reported by the mothers of their children, is to a large extent the result of the relatively small percentage who are married to or live with the children and their mothers.”**

These findings clearly indicate that the relatively poor average performance of the African American fathers, as reported by the mothers of their children, is to a large extent the result of the relatively small percentage who are married to or live with the children and their mothers (in the sample for this survey, only 40 percent, compared with 70 percent of the white fathers). In fact, the residence variable so completely accounts for black-white differences in the aspects of fathering performance covered by this study that it is hardly necessary to invoke other major explanations. Of course, anything that contributes to the black-white difference in fathers’ residence with children and mothers also contributes to the fathering performance differences. These influences include differences in education, employment stability, incarceration, and probably values and cultural expectations about marriage and relationship stability.

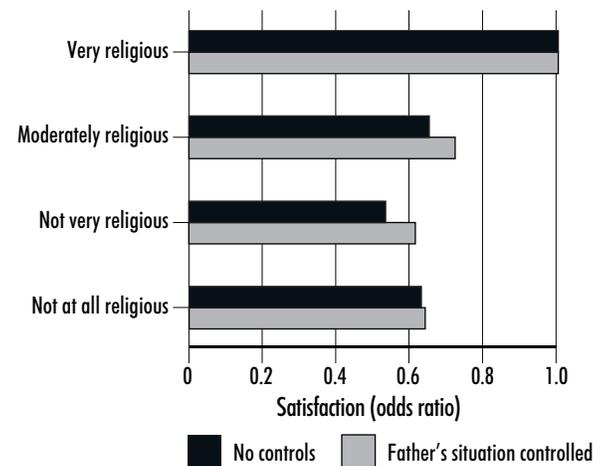
The mothers’ expressed satisfaction with the parenting of their children’s fathers also varied appreciably by mother’s education, though less than by race (Figure 3), and the relationship is positive as expected. Since it is almost certainly father’s rather than mother’s education that is primarily causative, the relationship would probably be even stronger if father’s education had been measured and used in the analysis instead of mother’s education. Therefore, education and its close correlates seem to be strong influences on the quality of fathering. However, they seem to have their effects almost entirely through whether or not the parents live together, because holding father’s family situation constant largely removes the relationship between mother’s education and mother’s satisfaction with the father.

Another strong correlate of mother’s satisfaction with the father is mother’s religiosity, as shown in Figure 4. It is likely that fathers’ and mothers’ religiosity correspond even less perfectly than their education, and again the characteristics of fathers are likely to be more strongly causative than those of mothers. It follows that religiosity is almost

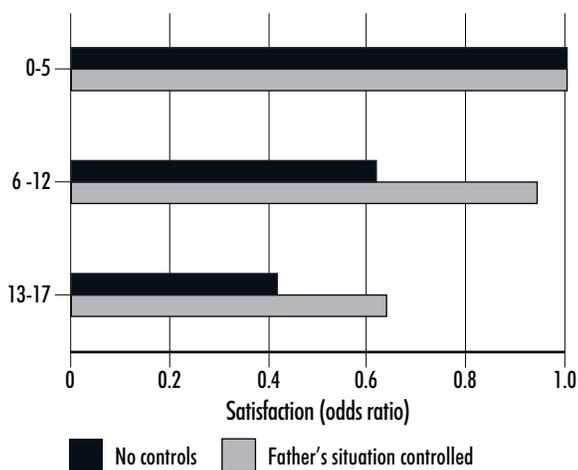


**FIGURE 3. Mothers’ Average Satisfaction with the Fathers of Their Children, by Mother’s Education**

certainly an even stronger influence on the quality of fathers’ parenting than the data in Figure 4 indicate, though variations in religiosity among those who are less than “very religious” seem to make little difference. Furthermore, most of the influence does not seem to be through whether or not the mother and father live together, because controlling father’s family situation leaves most of the relationship between religiosity and satisfaction intact. Therefore, it seems that strong religious beliefs, values, and commitments are conducive to good fathering whether or not the father lives with the mother.



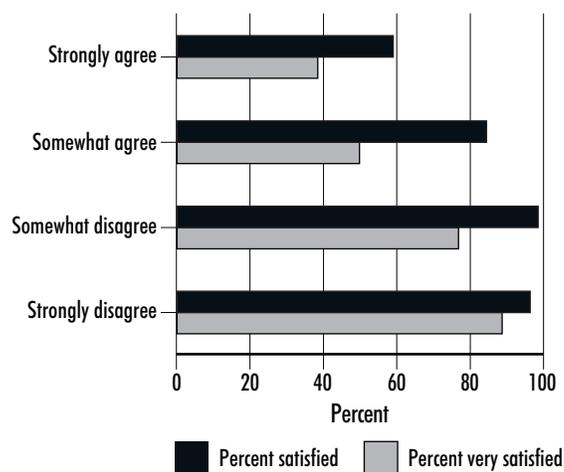
**FIGURE 4. Mothers’ Average Satisfaction with the Fathers of Their Children, by Mother’s Religiosity**



**FIGURE 5. Mothers' Average Satisfaction with the Fathers of Their Children, by Age of Focal Child**

Still another variable that is closely related to mother's satisfaction with father's parenting is age of focal child, the greatest reported satisfaction being when the child was ages 0-5 and the least being when the child was a teenager (Figure 5). This quite strong relationship is partly the result of the fact that the parents of the older children were less likely to be living together, but even when father's family situation is held constant, expressed satisfaction with the fathers of teenagers is substantially less than that with the fathers of younger children. At least for fathers, teenagers seem to be inherently more difficult to parent than younger children, as the folklore would have it. Data on how close fathers were to their children, both as reported by mothers in the survey conducted for this report and by fathers themselves in the Pop's Culture Survey, corroborate this view. According to the mothers, only 28 percent of the fathers of their teenagers had a "very close and warm" relationship with their children, compared with 38 and 57 percent, respectively, of the fathers of children ages 6-12 and 0-5. Only 29 percent of the fathers of teenage focal children reported that they were "extremely close" to their offspring, compared with 40 and 52 percent, respectively, of the fathers of children ages 6-12 and 0-5. In the case of fathers not living with their children, these differences may partially result from the fathers of the teenagers being separated from their offspring for a longer time on average. However, the relationships between indicators of good fathering and age of children exist for both fathers living with their children and those not doing so, and the relationships are only moderately weaker for the former.

The responses to the question about whether or not more support from the fathers would be useful deserves special attention. Of the evaluation questions, only the responses to this one failed to differ very substantially by father's residence (Table 1), and "agree" responses (indicating negative evaluations) were at least fairly high among all of the categories of mothers who in other respects tended to evaluate the fathers favorably. For instance, the agree percent is 62 for whites, 50 for college graduates, and 68 for very religious mothers. One might tend to discount these data in view of the fact that it is easy for people to say that they would like to have more of a good thing. Inconsistent with this view, however, is the fact that responses to this question are strongly related to expressed satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the father's performance as a parent—a relationship that remains after father's residence, race, and education are statistically held constant (religiosity is only weakly related to the responses). The relationship for white college graduates who live with the fathers of their children is shown in Figure 6. The unavoidable conclusion is that the feeling among mothers that fathers should do more to contribute to work-family balance is very widespread (though precisely how the mothers interpreted "work-family balance" is unclear) and that it makes an important difference in how the mothers feel about the fathers of their children.



**FIGURE 6. Percent of Mothers Satisfied with Father of Focal Child, by Agreement-Disagreement with Statement About Better Work-Family Balance if More Support from Father, White College Graduates Living with Fathers Only**

In spite of the lack of clarity about the meaning of these findings, when they are considered in conjunction with the literature on working wives' attitudes about the division of household labor, a reasonable interpretation is that they reflect widespread dissatisfaction by wives (and mothers) with the household division of labor. The relevant research indicates that working wives tend to expect greater participation by husbands in household tasks than the husbands are readily willing to provide and that this disparity often contributes to marital dissatisfaction.<sup>2</sup>

When the findings are viewed from this perspective, they suggest that resident fathers often perform well as fathers by interacting with and forming close ties to children without doing a fair share of household chores that would allow the mother to be a better parent. Consistent with this view is the fact that even among the survey mothers living with the fathers who reported that the latter spent more than adequate time with, and had a very close and warm relationship with, the focal child, 42 percent agreed (19 percent strongly) that they could achieve better work-family balance if they received more support from the father. And even in this rarefied category, responses to the support question relate strongly

to expressed satisfaction with father's performance. Although virtually all of these mothers said that they were at least somewhat satisfied with the fathers, those who agreed with the need-more-support statement were substantially less likely to say that they were very satisfied (78 versus 95 percent). The lesson is that good fathering consists not only of direct parenting activities, but also of adequate participation in household tasks that enables the mother to parent more effectively.

A related point is that good parenting consists not only of

the more pleasant of parenting activities, such as playing with the child, but of the more burdensome ones as well.

Although how the mothers felt about the support they received from the fathers seems to have had an important effect on their overall satisfaction with the fathers, it is important to point out that other factors apparently had a considerably larger effect. A multivariate analysis in which each of the other evaluation variables was related to satisfaction and in which the others were statistically held constant showed the like-more-support variable to be the weakest predictor of satisfaction by a large margin. The two strongest predictors of overall satisfaction were how close the mothers perceived the fathers to be to the focal child and how well they thought the fathers balanced work and family.

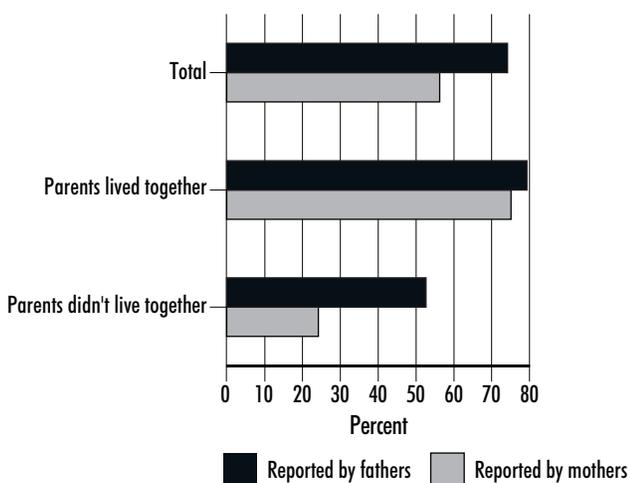
Two questions assessing the quality of the fathers' parenting are comparable between the Mama Says Survey and the Pop's Culture Survey. The responses to these two questions provide aggregate-level data roughly representative of two populations linked together at the individual couple level by common parentage of a child. In view of the fact that the data are only roughly representative of the two populations and the fact that sampling for the two surveys was different, the data should be viewed with caution. Nevertheless, if the assessments of fathers' parenting by the mothers and by the fathers were both completely accurate, the responses to comparable questions on the two surveys should be similar. Even though it is unlikely that any mother in the mothers sample had a co-parenting relationship with any father in the fathers sample, large aggregate differences between responses from the two samples must necessarily reflect numerous differences within individual co-parenting relationships.

The two comparable questions deal with the adequacy of the time the father spent with the focal child and the quality of the father's parenting skills, and it is hardly surprising that on average the fathers gave more favorable responses to these questions than did the mothers (Figures 7 and 8).

**"The lesson is that good fathering consists not only of direct parenting activities, but also of adequate participation in household tasks that enables the mother to parent more effectively."**

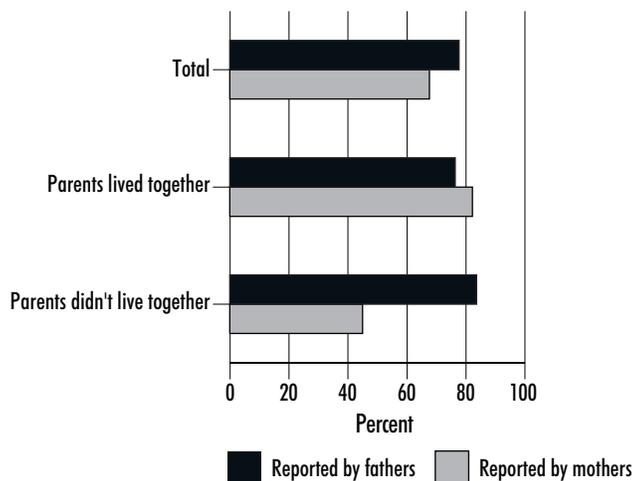
Less expected is the fact that these differences are entirely (in the case of the parenting skills question) or almost entirely the result of differences in responses from parents who did not live with the other parent of their children (Figures 7 and 8). In the aggregate, mothers and fathers living with the other parent of their children closely agreed on the aspects of the quality of the fathers' parenting tapped by the questions, but the fathering of nonresident fathers was evaluated much more positively, in the aggregate, by those fathers than by the mothers who co-parented with such men.

These findings are interesting and potentially important, for at least two reasons. First, they strongly suggest that parents living together tend to arrive at shared perceptions of reality in regard to their parenting whereas parents not living together tend not to do so. An alternative explanation is that parents who fail to arrive at shared perceptions tend to separate, and while both explanations are likely to be partly correct, we believe that the relative lack of shared perceptions by parents who do not live together is to a large extent a result of the lack of co-residence and the kind of relationships that tend to accompany living together. Second, the nonresident fathers' very high evaluation of their parenting skills indicates that these fathers tend to blame problems with their parenting on conditions external to themselves, such as lack of cooperation from the mothers. In contrast, mothers who co-parent with such men tend to



**FIGURE 7. Percent of Fathers Reported to Spend Adequate or More than Adequate Time with Focal Child, by Whether or Not Parents Lived Together**

blame the men. Neither the mothers nor the fathers are likely to be completely correct, but the important point is that their disagreements are almost certainly impediments to effective co-parenting and are also likely partly to reflect failures of co-parenting that occur for various other reasons.



**FIGURE 8. Percent of Fathers Reported to Have Good Fathering Skills, by Whether or Not Parents Lived Together**

We have not mentioned Hispanics in this discussion of mothers' evaluations of fathers' performance, the reason being that with one exception the differences in evaluation between Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites that we found are so small that the likelihood that they resulted from chance is large. The one exception is in the responses to the question about whether or not greater support from the father would make it easier for the mother to balance work and family, the "strongly agree" responses being 36 percent for Hispanics and only 24 percent for non-Hispanic whites. This difference is large enough to be important and is unlikely to have resulted entirely from chance. Furthermore, statistically holding constant age of the focal child, whether or not the parents lived together, mother's education, and mother's religiosity makes little difference in the relationship between ethnicity and the responses. This finding suggests, but of course does not prove, that Hispanic fathers tend to contribute relatively little to household and child care tasks even as other aspects of their fathering, such as spending time with and being close to their children, equals that of non-Hispanic white fathers.

# THE MOTHERS' GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARD FATHERS AND FATHERING

The questions used for Mama Says Survey are not as focused on general attitudes about fathering as are those used for the Pop's Culture Survey, but a few do deal with such attitudes, and some of those treat topics emphasized in the Pop's Culture report. Here we discuss primarily the responses to questions relating to the replaceability of fathers and the importance of marriage to good fathering.

## THE REPLACEABILITY OF FATHERS

The mothers were asked to agree or disagree (strongly or somewhat) with the statements "If a child does not have an involved father, a mother can adequately substitute for the absence of a father, essentially being both a father and a mother" and "If a child does not have an involved father, a male role model, such as a friend of the mother, can be an adequate substitute for a father." Similar but not identical questions were asked on the survey of fathers, for which the agree responses were 53 and 57 percent, respectively—majorities, though small ones, that the report suggested would be disturbing to those who believe in the importance of fathers. If so, the responses of the mothers to the replaceability questions will be even more disturbing, the agree percentage being 55 for the replacement-by-mother statement and 66 for the replacement-by-other-male statement. Apparently, belief that fathers are irreplaceable is a minority position among both fathers and mothers.

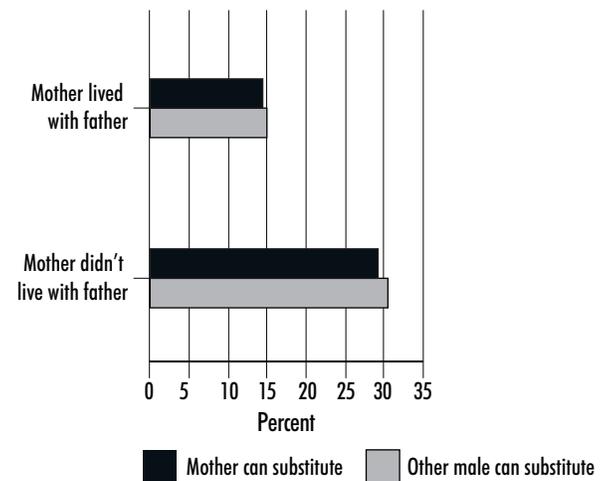
However, the data may not mean exactly what they seem to mean. The statements say that the mother or another male can be an adequate substitute for a father, not that such an outcome is likely or can be accomplished easily. Some respondents, especially some of those who "somewhat agreed" with the statements, may not think that adequate substitution for a father happens very often.

Therefore, we focus here on the "strongly agree" responses, given by 20 percent of the respondents to each question (10 percent strongly agreed with both statements). These responses more nearly represent a fathers-are-not-necessary position than do the total agree responses.

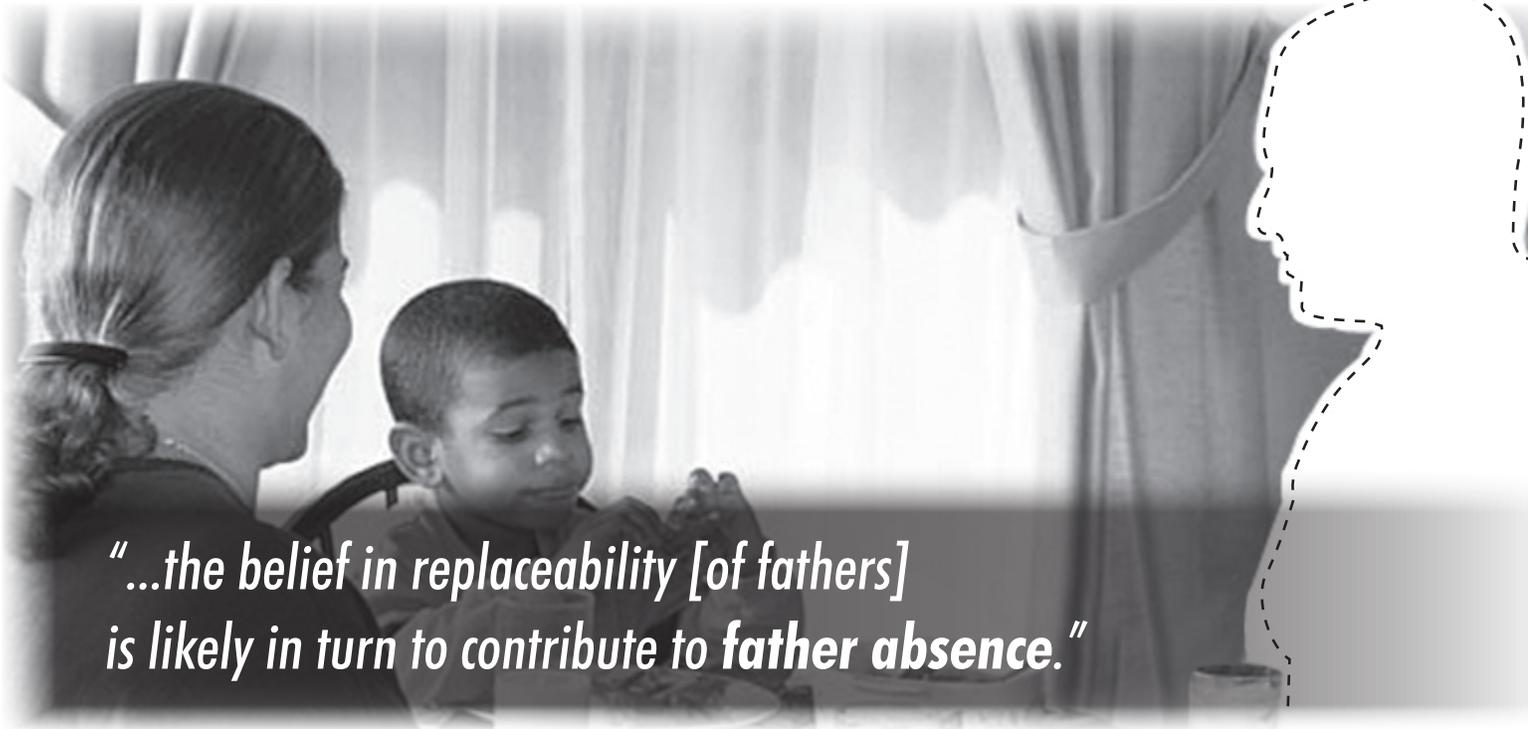
Race, education, and whether or not the mother lived with the father are substantially related to strongly agreeing with the replaceability statements (see Figures 9 through 11), and each of these relationships remains large when the other two variables are held constant. Religiosity, a strong predictor of fathers' views about their replaceability, did not make the list of important predictors of strongly agree responses, although "very religious" mothers were considerably more likely than the others to "strongly disagree" with the mother-can-substitute statement (33 versus 17 percent).

Mothers who did not live with the father of the focal child were about twice as likely as other mothers to strongly agree with the replaceability statements (Figure 9)—a finding consistent with the fact that respondents to the Pop's Culture Survey who were not living with their children were considerably more

**"Mothers who did not live with the father... were about twice as likely as other mothers to strongly agree [that fathers are replaceable]."**

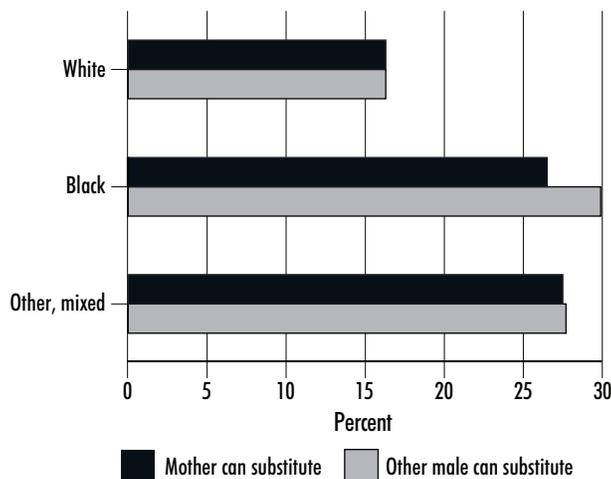


**FIGURE 9.** Percent of Mothers Who Strongly Agreed with Statements Saying That Fathers Are Replaceable, by Whether or Not Mother Lived with the Father of the Focal Child



*“...the belief in replaceability [of fathers] is likely in turn to contribute to father absence.”*

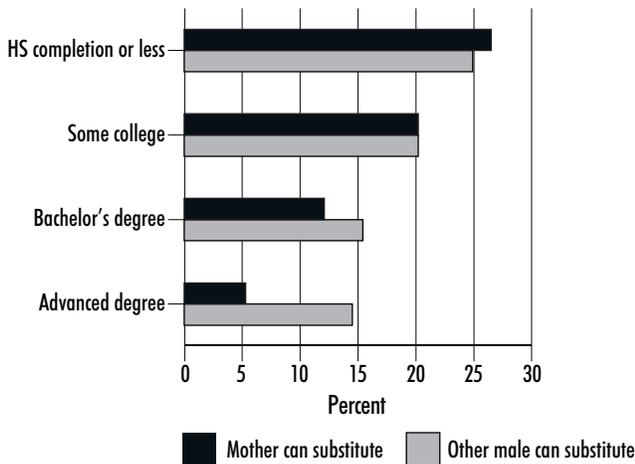
likely to agree with statements saying that fathers are replaceable than were other fathers. These findings are not surprising, because the belief that others can adequately substitute for fathers is likely to be comforting to mothers and fathers who feel responsible for father absence, and such beliefs almost certainly make persons less reluctant to contribute to father absence.



**FIGURE 10.** Percent of Mothers Who Strongly Agreed with Statements Saying That Fathers Are Replaceable, by Mother’s Race

Black-white differences in strong agreement with the replaceability statements are almost as large as those by residential situation (Figure 10) and are not largely explained by the latter; belief that others can adequately substitute for fathers was prevalent among the African American mothers living with the fathers of their children as well as among those not living with the fathers. For instance, the strongly agree percent for the other-male-can substitute statement for the co-residential black mothers (26 percent) is almost as high as that for the nonresidential white mothers (27 percent), is only moderately lower than that for the nonresidential black mothers (33 percent), and is more than twice as great as that for the co-residential white mothers (12 percent). The prevalence of the belief that another male can adequately substitute for an absent or uninvolved father is almost certainly partly a response to the prevalence of father absence among African Americans, but the belief in replaceability is likely in turn to contribute to father absence.

The inverse relationship between education and belief in the replaceability of fathers is also strong, particularly in the case of believing that the mother can adequately substitute for the father (Figure 11). Again, whether or not the mother lived with the father does not largely account for the relationship, which



**FIGURE 11. Percent of Mothers Who Strongly Agreed with Statements Saying That Fathers Are Replaceable, by Mother's Education**

is strong for both mothers who did and did not live with the fathers of their children (data not shown). These findings are consistent with the proposition that belief in father replaceability is more prevalent in subpopulations with high rates of father absence and with the finding of other surveys that well-educated persons have distinctly more traditional views about marriage than do those with less education.<sup>3</sup>

As we imply above, the relatively high degree of belief in father replaceability by parents who do not live together, and by other persons in populations in which father absence is prevalent, may to a large extent grow out of parents' need to view their personal situations positively and to assuage feelings of guilt about their contribution to father absence. And we point out that belief in father replaceability is likely in turn to contribute to father absence. We tend to favor these explanations, but there is another possible one that cannot be ruled out, namely, that there are fairly numerous instances in

**"...beliefs [about the replaceability of fathers] apparently don't usually lead to lack of concern about father absence."**

which mothers and/or other males do adequately substitute, or seem to adequately substitute, for absent or uninvolved fathers and that persons in subpopulations in which father absence is prevalent are more likely to have observed such instances.

Somewhat at odds with this interpretation is the fact that mothers in subpopulations with high father absence apparently were more concerned about it, on the average, than the other mothers. Although there is little difference in the total agree responses to the father-absence crisis statement, respondents in those subpopulations with high father absence (and high agreement that fathers can be replaced) were more likely than other respondents to strongly agree that there is a father absence crisis. For instance, the strongly agree percentage is 72 for mothers not living with the fathers of their children (compared with 64 for those living with the fathers), is 83 for blacks (compared with 62 for whites), and is 69 for those lacking college degrees (compared with 61 for college graduates). Only the black-white difference is very large, but it, along with the consistent direction of the other differences, indicates that familiarity with father absence breeds concern about it.

In summary, the large proportion of mothers who think that mothers or other males can adequately substitute for absent or uninvolved fathers is worrisome, because those beliefs almost certainly contribute at least to some small degree to father absence and lack of involvement. Fortunately, however, the beliefs apparently don't usually lead to lack of concern about father absence.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF MARRIAGE

On both the Pop's Culture Survey and the Mama Says Survey, the respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement "All else being equal men perform best as fathers if they are married to the mothers of their children." The fathers were moderately more likely than the mothers to agree

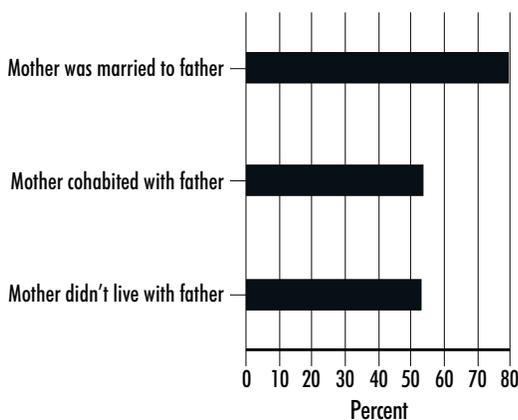
with the statement (81 versus 68 percent) and were appreciably more likely to strongly agree with it (57 versus 35 percent).

Three variables from the mothers survey are strongly and independently related to this one, namely, whether or not the mother was married to the father of the focal child, race, and religiosity (see Figures 12 through 14). A rather weak relationship between education and responses to the marriage question virtually disappears when the other variables are held constant.

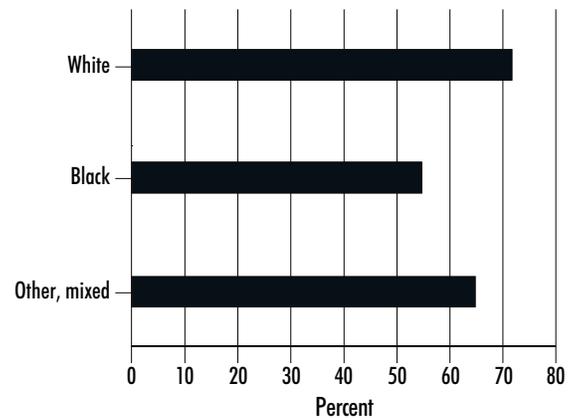
The strongest relationship by far is with whether or not the mother was married to the father of the focal child, the percent of agree responses being more than 25 points higher for the married category than for either the mothers cohabitating with the father or those not living with him (Figure 12). The causal relationship between the two variables is probably reciprocal, with each affecting the other to some degree. Mothers who believe in the importance of marriage for promoting good fathering should be more motivated to marry and stay married to the fathers than other mothers, and beliefs on this topic are likely to be partially a rationalization for situations that people find themselves in and for decisions that they have made. Also, the attitudes may be to some extent based on experience; for instance, some of the mothers divorced from the fathers may feel that their marriages failed to contribute to good fathering by their husbands.

The white mothers were more likely than the black ones to say that they believed in the efficacy of marriage in promoting good

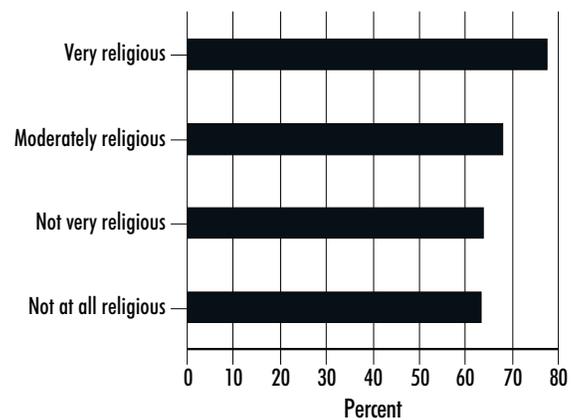
fathering (Figure 13), but the difference is only a moderately large 17 percentage points and is reduced to 11 points when whether or not the mother lived with the father is held constant.



**FIGURE 12. Percent of Mothers Who Agreed That Fathers Perform Best When Married to the Mothers of Their Children, by Mother's Relationship to Father of Focal Child**



**FIGURE 13. Percent of Mothers Who Agreed That Fathers Perform Best When Married to the Mothers of Their Children, by Mother's Race**



**FIGURE 14. Percent of Mothers Who Agreed That Fathers Perform Best When Married to the Mothers of Their Children, by Mother's Religiosity**

The relationship of religiosity with agreeing that fathers tend to perform better if they are married to the mothers of their children shown in Figure 14 is not very strong and consists mainly of a difference between the "very religious" respondents and all others. However, the relationship is stronger if only the strongly agree percentages are compared across the religiosity categories, being 53 for the very religious and 33, 29, and 31 for the other degrees of religiosity, in descending order.

**"...the fact that two-thirds of the mothers surveyed agreed that marriage tends to contribute to good fathering is good news..."**

Unlike several of the other statements with which the respondents were asked to agree or disagree, the statement about marriage and good fathering is more nearly a statement of fact than a statement of opinion, because considerable evidence supports it.<sup>4</sup> The only important ambiguity in the evidence is whether it is marriage or only the parents' living together that matters. Some evidence considered alone, including results from the Mama Says Survey reported above, indicate that it may be only living together that is important. However, when the evidence that it is important that the parents live together is combined with the fact that married parents are much more likely than cohabiting ones to continue living together,<sup>5</sup> it seems virtually certain to us that marriage and the relationship commitment that it signifies do typically contribute substantially to good fathering. Therefore, the fact that two-thirds of the mothers surveyed agreed that marriage tends to contribute to good fathering is good news, and of course the perceptions of these women add to the evidence on the issue. On the other hand, the fact that a third of the mothers surveyed did not believe in the importance of marriage for fathering indicates a need for education on the relationship of marriage to the performance of fathers.

## **OTHER ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS**

The responses to several other questions on the survey that don't fall under the two kinds of attitudes we discuss above are likely to be of interest to some readers of this report. All of these questions are in the agree-disagree format on the questionnaire, and the percent of agree and of strongly agree responses to each one is given in Table 5.

The first two questions, which were also asked on the Pop's Culture Survey, relate to the mothers' perceptions of how people in general view fathers and how the media portray them. A substantial

majority of the mothers thought that fathers get a lot of respect, but a smaller majority also thought that the media portray fathers in a negative light. A larger percentage of the fathers (92) than of the mothers (76) thought that fathers get a lot of respect, but a larger percent of the fathers (65 versus 55) also thought that the media portray fathers in a negative light. The mothers' perceptions of how much respect fathers get varied little among the categories we compared, but belief that the media portray fathers in a negative light was greater among the very religious respondents than among others (69 versus 51 percent agreed with the statement), and was greater among those who lived with the fathers of their children than among the other mothers (60 versus 47 percent agreed).

The third question is similar to a question on the Pop's Culture Survey, the difference being that that survey asked each respondent if he was adequately prepared for fatherhood. Whereas 54 percent of the fathers agreed (22 percent strongly) that they were adequately prepared, the mothers were less sanguine about the fathers' preparation, with less than a third agreeing that fathers are usually well prepared and only 12 percent strongly agreeing. The percentages from the two surveys are not directly comparable, but the fathers survey data suggest that, by a small margin,



	Agreed	Strongly Agreed
<b>Percent Who...</b>		
Fathers generally get a lot of respect for being fathers.	76 (92) <sup>a</sup>	38
The media tend to portray fathers in a negative light.	55 (65) <sup>a</sup>	18
When men first become fathers, they usually feel adequately prepared for fatherhood.	32 (54) <sup>b</sup>	12
Mothers and fathers usually parent in about the same way.	16	5
Mothers are usually more nurturing than fathers.	93	55
I am a positive influence on the ability of the father of my child (the focal child) to be a good dad.	86	46
If I were pregnant and had a choice, I would be more likely to use a hospital or birthing center that provides support for the father during the mother's pregnancy.	86	54
When I was pregnant with my child (the focal child), my doctors and other healthcare providers worked to involve the father in my pregnancy.	65	34

TABLE 5. Percent of Mothers Who Agreed and Who Strongly Agreed with Selected Statements (“Not sure” and similar responses are excluded from the base for the percentages. Minimum number of respondents is 1,464.) <sup>a</sup>Percent of respondents to NFI Pops Culture Survey who agreed with this statement. <sup>b</sup>Percent of respondents to NFI Pops Culture Survey who agreed that they were well prepared.

fathers usually are well prepared whereas the mothers survey data does not. This is another instance of mothers evaluating fathers less positively than fathers evaluate themselves. Therefore, there is almost certainly an even greater need for preparing men for fatherhood than the fathers survey data indicate.

The next two questions in the table relate to whether or not parenting tends to be androgynous, and clearly very few of the mothers believed that it does. However, a somewhat larger percent of the mothers who lived with the fathers of their children than of those who didn't agreed that mothers and fathers parent in about the same way (24 versus 16), and a larger percent of the respondents without a bachelor's degree than of the college graduates agreed (23 versus 15). The total agree percentages for the mothers-are-more-nurturing question vary little among the compared categories, but the strongly agree percentages are somewhat higher for mothers who didn't live with the fathers than for those who did (63 versus 51 percent) and for persons without a bachelor's degree than for college graduates (58 versus 45). Of course, these data reveal nothing about whether or not the mothers viewed androgynous parenting as an ideal or a possibility.

It is not surprising that a very large percentage of the mothers agreed, and that almost half strongly agreed, that they were a positive influence on the ability of the father of the focal child to be a good dad. Most of those who failed to agree were not living with the father of the focal child, but 69 percent of those mothers agreed, and 30 percent strongly agreed, that they were a positive influence. In view of the fact that 58 percent of the not-living-with-mother fathers sampled by the Pop's Culture Survey said that the mothers were to some extent an obstacle to their good parenting, there appear to be many instances among parents who do not live together in which the mother and father disagree about the nature of the mother's influence.

The final two questions in Table 5 deal with healthcare providers involving the father in the mother's pregnancy. The responses to the questions show very substantial desire by the mothers for such involvement, and considerable, but apparently less than the desired amount, of father involvement in the mothers' own pregnancies. Responses to the question about personal experience varied little by the age of the focal child—an indication of little recent change in the extent to which healthcare providers involve the fathers.

# THE MOTHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF OBSTACLES TO THE FATHERS' GOOD PARENTING

The Pop's Culture Survey asked the respondents to rate each item in a list of possible obstacles to good fathering according to how much it applied to them. Of the 14 items on the list, the respondents as a whole gave the highest average rating, by a large margin, to "work responsibilities," but those fathers not married to the mothers of the focal child gave the highest rating to "resistance or lack of encouragement from child's mother."

The respondents to the mothers survey were given a similar list consisting of 12 items, which they were asked to rate according to importance as obstacles to the good parenting of the father of the focal child, the rating labels being "very important," "fairly important," "not very important," and "no obstacle at all." The percent who selected one of the top two ratings for each item is given in Table 6, for all respondents and separately for mothers who did and did not live with the fathers.

"...the respondents as a whole gave the highest average rating, by a large margin, to "work responsibilities..."

	<b>Married or cohabited (968)</b>	<b>Didn't live together (564)</b>	<b>TOTAL (1,532)</b>
<b>Entity/Condition</b>			
Work responsibilities	59	40	52
Father's relationship with own father	44	49	46
Lack of knowledge about how to be a good father	29	59	40
Lack of parenting resources designed specifically for fathers	25	46	33
Lack of support and encouragement from relatives, such as father's siblings and parents	26	42	32
Lack of support and encouragement from father's male friends	24	43	31
Influences on child from media and popular culture	24	20	22
Father's relationship with woman other than child's mother	10	38	20
Resistance or lack of encouragement from child's mother (self)	15	20	17
Neighborhood influences on child	15	19	17
Treatment of fathers by the courts	13	22	17
Responsibility for stepchild(ren)	9	17	12
<b>Mean</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>28</b>

TABLE 6. Percent of Mothers Who Said That Each of Twelve Entities/Conditions Was Either a "Very Important" or "Fairly Important" Obstacle to Good Parenting by the Father of the Focal Child, by Whether or Not Mother and Father Lived Together (Number of respondents for each category is given in parentheses.)

The mothers as a whole selected “work responsibilities” as the most important obstacle, followed by “father’s relationship with own father” and “father’s lack of knowledge about how to be a good father,” “lack of parenting resources designed for fathers,” “lack of support and encouragement from relatives,” and “lack of support and encouragement from male friends.” The mothers who did not live with the fathers ranked “father’s lack of knowledge about how to be a good father” first by a substantial margin, with “father’s relationship with own father,” “lack of parenting resources designed for fathers,” “lack of support and encouragement from male friends,” and “lack of support and encouragement from relatives” all ranking above “work responsibilities,” which ranked just above “father’s relationship with woman other than child’s mother.”

Given the importance that both mothers and fathers assign to work responsibilities, there can be little doubt that work-family conflict tends to appreciably reduce the quality of fathering and that attempts to improve fathering need to focus to a large extent on that conflict. Although the extent to which the mothers thought work to be an obstacle differed considerably according to whether or not they were living with the fathers of their children, when that variable is held constant, responses to the work question differ little by race, education, ethnicity, or religiosity. Work-parenting conflicts are apparently ubiquitous among American fathers. The mothers not living with the fathers probably gave relatively little emphasis to work as an obstacle because other obstacles tended to overshadow it for them, or perhaps the fathers of their children were on average less assiduous workers.

The high ranking that the mothers gave to the father’s relationship to his own father as an obstacle to good parenting is a potentially important finding, although its meaning is not completely clear. It probably grows largely out of feelings that the fathers in the older generation were poor role models, but some of the mothers may have felt that the older men actively hampered their sons’ parenting. In any event, this finding no doubt at least partly reflects the substantial redefinition over the past few decades of what constitutes good fathering.

The first place ranking the mothers not living with the fathers gave “lack of knowledge about how to be a good father” contrasts sharply with the seventh place ranking that fathers not married to the mothers of their focal child gave to that obstacle



***“...Given the importance that both mothers and fathers assign to work responsibilities, there can be little doubt that work-family conflict tends to appreciably reduce the quality of fathering...”***



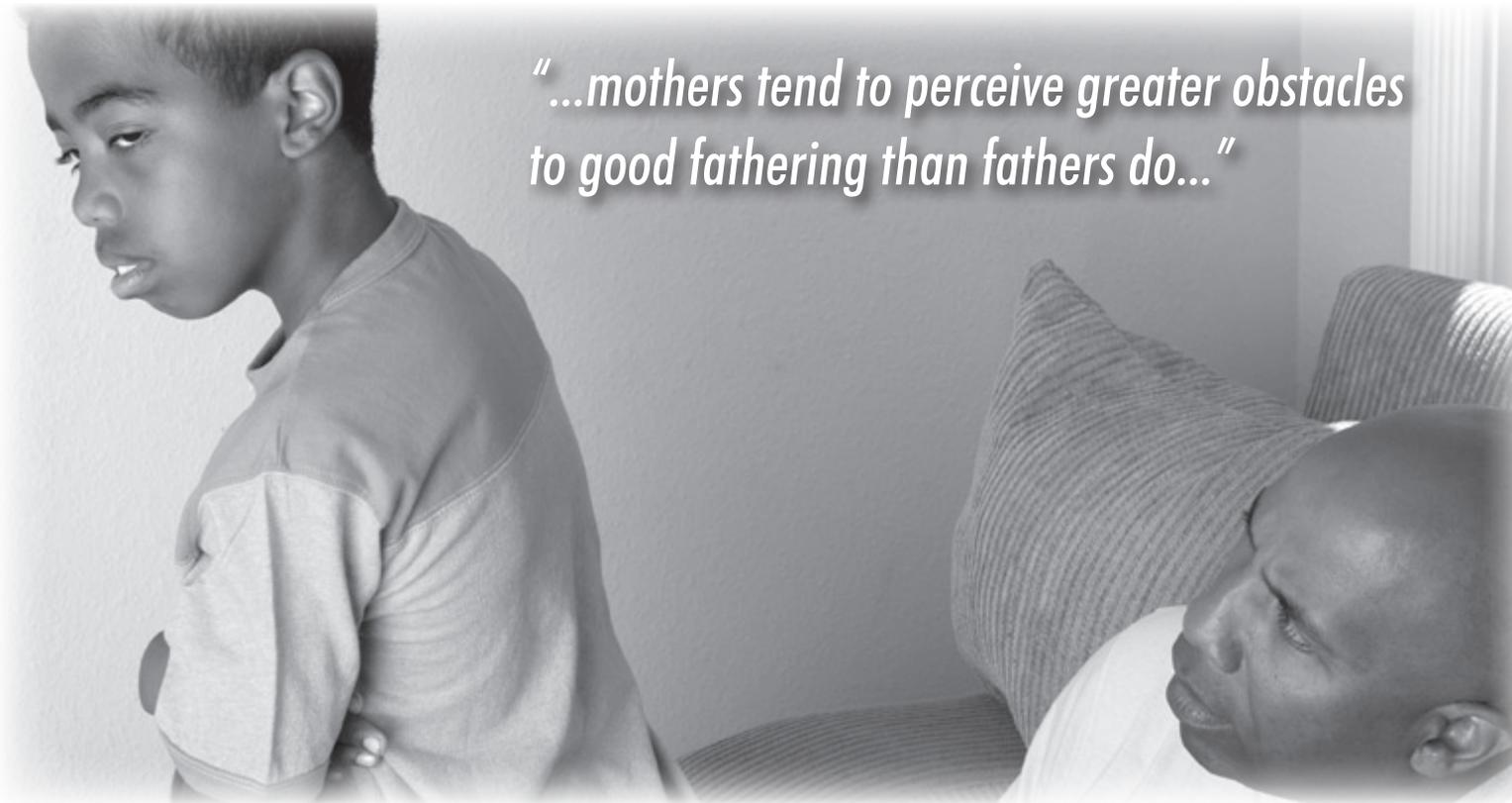
**“This is further evidence that mothers tend to blame the characteristics of non-resident fathers for their failures in parenting while those fathers tend to blame influences from outside themselves...”**

in the Pop’s Culture Survey. This is further evidence that mothers tend to blame the characteristics of non-resident fathers for their failures in parenting while those fathers tend to blame influences from outside themselves, especially the mothers of their children. The respondents to the Pop’s Culture Survey who were not married to the mothers of their children ranked “resistance or lack of encouragement from child’s mother” first out of the list of 14 possible obstacles.

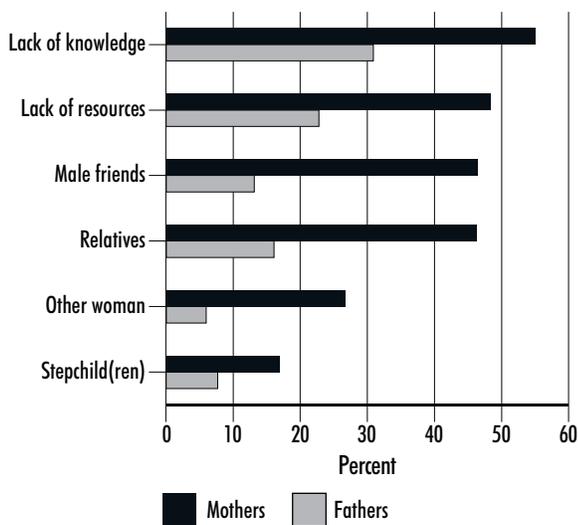
More than a third of the mothers not living with the fathers considered “father’s relationship with woman other than child’s mother” to be a very or fairly important obstacle to the father’s parenting of the focal child, and this included 64 percent of the respondents when the father had a marriage or romantic relationship with another woman. Nine percent of the mothers married to the fathers, and 15 percent of those cohabiting with them, also said that another woman was a very or fairly important obstacle, but some of those respondents may have had in mind the father’s mother.

Few of the respondents considered responsibility for a stepchild(ren) to be an important obstacle to the good fathering of the focal child, but only because few fathers had stepchildren. For the fathers who did not live with the mothers and who had at least one stepchild, 39 percent of the mothers considered responsibility for that child(ren) to be a very or fairly important obstacle to good fathering of the focal child. Even among mothers married to the fathers, most if not all of whom were the mothers of their husbands’ stepchildren, many (29 percent) stated that the presence of one or more stepchildren was an important obstacle to the good fathering of the focal child.

The responses to the “obstacles” questions on the mothers and fathers surveys are not perfectly comparable because the labels for the response alternatives are not the same even though there are four ratings for each obstacle for both surveys. The last response label for both surveys is “no obstacle at all,” but the first three labels for the fathers survey are “a great deal,” “somewhat,” and “not very much” rather than the labels for the mothers survey given above. Therefore, the responses can be made roughly comparable only by collapsing the first three alternatives and looking at the percent of respondents who said that each item was at least to some degree an obstacle. When this is done, for the ten questions with comparably worded stems, six of the mother-father differences are quite large



*“...mothers tend to perceive greater obstacles to good fathering than fathers do...”*



**FIGURE 15.** Percent of Mothers and of Fathers Who Perceived That Each of Six Entities/Conditions Was to Some Extent an Obstacle to Good Fathering

(either more than 15 percentage points, or one percent being more than twice the other) and almost certainly represent important differences between the respondents to the two surveys. These differences are shown in Figure 15.

The mothers were more likely than the fathers to perceive each entity/condition to be an obstacle, the difference being especially large for father’s male friends, father’s relatives, and other woman but also being quite large for father’s lack of knowledge, lack of resources for fathers, and stepchild(ren). Clearly, mothers tend to perceive greater obstacles to good fathering than fathers do, a conclusion reinforced by the fact that the mother-father differences for two of the four remaining comparable items, while relatively small, are in the same direction as the differences shown in Figure 15. Surprisingly, the mothers were even more likely than the fathers to consider resistance or lack of encouragement from the child’s mother and treatment of fathers by the courts to be obstacles.

# THE MOTHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTING RESOURCES USED OR NEEDED BY FATHERS

The respondents to the Mama Says Survey were given a list of places and persons to which fathers may go for help with their parenting and were asked whether the father of their focal child had drawn upon each to help him be a better father. The percentages of yes responses, ordered from highest to lowest, are given in Table 7.

These data closely correspond to roughly comparable data from the Pops Culture Survey. For instance, “you, the mother of the child” tops the mothers’ list and “wife, partner, or child’s mother” ranks first in the fathers’ reports of where they had sought help. “A professional person” ranks last in both sets of data, and both mothers and fathers reported that other fathers, the fathers’ mothers, and the fathers’ fathers were frequent sources of help.

The responses to the help question differ considerably by education, religiosity, and whether or not the parents lived together but not by race or ethnicity. Forty-four percent of the college graduate mothers reported that the father of the focal child had consulted books, newspapers, magazines, or the

internet, compared with 26 percent of the other respondents, but consulting a professional person was not substantially different for the two categories (26 versus 20 percent). As would be expected, the very religious mothers were much more likely than the less religious ones to say that the fathers sought help from a place of worship or a member of the clergy (59 versus 25 percent), and the mothers living with the fathers were much more likely than the others to say that the fathers sought help from them (86 versus 48 percent). In spite of the considerable variation among the compared categories, respondents in all categories were more likely to report that the fathers sought help from persons with whom they had close personal relationships than from more impersonal sources—a finding consistent with data from the Pop’s Culture Survey.

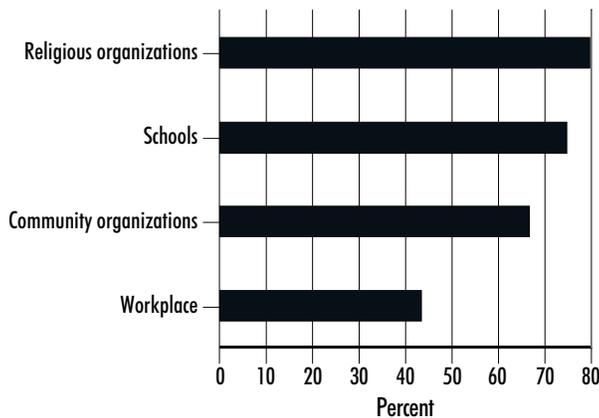
The respondents to the survey of mothers were presented with a list of six places that might offer support to fathers to help them be better dads and were asked to rate each as “very important,” “fairly important,” or “not important.” Two of the places, prisons and the military, are not relevant

“...respondents in all categories were more likely to report that the fathers sought help from persons with whom they had close personal relationships than from more impersonal sources...”

	Percentage
<b>Resources/Entities</b>	
You, the mother of the child	75
His own mother	56
Other fathers	49
His own father	43
A place of worship, a minister or rabbi	35
Books, magazines, newspapers, or the internet	33
A professional person, such as a psychologist or doctor	24

TABLE 7. Percent of Mothers Who Reported That the Father of Focal Child Had Consulted Each of Seven Entities for Help with His Fathering (“Not sure” and similar responses are excluded from the base for the percentages. Minimum number of respondents is 1,365.)

for most fathers, but the other four (schools, churches and other communities of faith, the workplace, and community based organizations, such as the YMCA) are. Almost all of the respondents agreed that all of the places are at least “fairly important,” but the “very important” responses varied considerably for the different places (Figure 16). “Churches and other communities of faith” ranked first, followed closely by schools, then by “community-based organizations.” Even among the less religious, the “very important” responses were high for churches, being 58 percent for those “not at all religious” and 72 percent for those “not very religious.” Given the importance that the mothers placed on work responsibilities as obstacles to good fathering, it is somewhat surprising that a relatively small percent apparently thought that the workplace should be proactive in helping fathers.

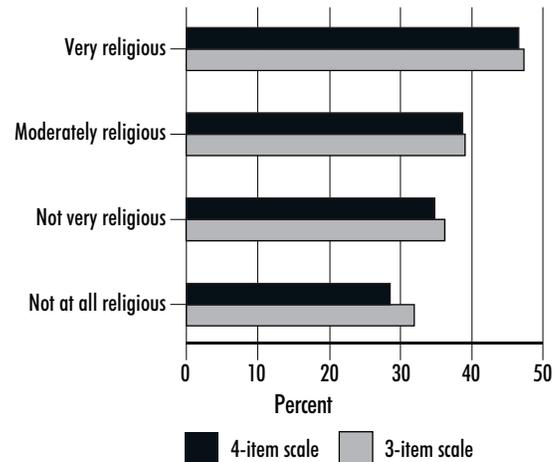


**FIGURE 16. Percent of Mothers Who Said That It Is “Very Important” That Selected Places Offer Support to Fathers**

We used the responses to these four questions to create what we call the Community-Should-Help-Fathers Scale, which is the sum of the ratings across the questions when very important is scored 2, fairly important 1, and not important 0. (For those interested in the technical aspects of scale construction, Cronbach’s Alpha is .712, which is acceptable for a four-item scale.) This scale can be considered a measure of a general disposition to believe that extra-familial institutions in the community should help fathers.

Of the variables we used in a multivariate analysis to predict the scale scores, only religiosity emerged as strongly and

independently related to the scores, the relationship, without controls, being shown in Figure 17. Because highly religious persons would obviously be more inclined than others to believe that communities of faith should help fathers, we removed the “churches” item from the scale, and the relationship of religiosity to the resulting three-item scale is also shown in Figure 17. In view of the fact that religiosity relates almost as highly to the three-item scale as to the four-item one, religious persons seem on the average to take a generally more communitarian and less individualistic view of fatherhood issues than less religious ones do.



**FIGURE 17. Percent of Mothers with the Highest Possible Score on Each of Two Versions of the Community-Should-Help-Fathers Scale, by Mother’s Religiosity**

This finding is important in view of the fact that the Pop’s Culture Survey found that the more religious fathers were less likely than the others to believe that the government should help fathers. Of course, mothers and fathers could simply be different, but it seems more likely that a generally communitarian view of assistance to fathers and belief that the government should help are not highly correlated with one another, that highly religious persons tend to think that extra-familial assistance to fathers is important but that it should also be extra-governmental.

# CONCLUSIONS

“[The two surveys] provide some of the strongest evidence to date that when fathers, mothers, and children live together, fathering is optimized.”

Of the several implications of the survey findings reported here for public policy and for strategies to be employed by organizations interested in promoting responsible fatherhood, the most important grow out of the fact that the Mama Says Survey of mothers and the earlier Pop’s Culture Survey of fathers provide some of the strongest evidence to date that when fathers, mothers, and children live together, fathering is optimized. And when the findings on living together are considered in conjunction with the fact that stable parent-child co-residence is highly associated with the marriage of the parents, the findings indicate that stable, well-functioning marriages are extremely important for good fathering and responsible fatherhood. It follows that public policies and private efforts that successfully promote healthy marriages will also contribute substantially to good fathering—not a new insight but one that deserves greater emphasis in discussions about ways to promote child well-being and development.

We must quickly add, however, that we are advocating the promotion of healthy marriages *in addition to* rather than *in place of* efforts to help nonresident fathers function more effectively. We know that many fathers will continue to be separated residentially from their children and from the mothers of their children, and while the parenting of these men now appears to be as a whole quite poor, it could be better than it is. There are many obstacles to good parenting by nonresident fathers, but with sufficient effort by the fathers, and support of those efforts by others, many of the obstacles can be at least partially overcome. Thus the promotion of healthy marriages and of good parenting by nonresident fathers should be pursued in tandem.

The findings about the importance of co-residence also have implications for decisions made by married parents who are contemplating divorce. To the extent that those persons do some kind

of informal cost-benefit analysis, the probable costs of divorce and subsequent family changes should include a decline in the quality of the father’s parenting and of his relationship with his child or children. Whether or not this probable cost should determine the outcome of decisions about separation and divorce depends on the circumstances of the individual cases, but it should always be taken into account. Of course, it should also be on the minds of persons who contemplate actions that will endanger their marriages and who make decisions about commitments to, and investments in, their marriages.

The reaction of some readers to the extensive discussion of the importance of marriage to good fathering in this report is likely to be, “We didn’t





*“The respondents to both surveys considered “work responsibilities” to be the greatest obstacle to good fathering...”*

need a survey to tell us that.” However, that seems not to be true, given that about a third of the respondents to this survey did not agree that men generally perform better as fathers if they are married to the mothers of their children, and about two-thirds did not strongly agree. It follows that dissemination of social scientific evidence on the importance of marriage to good fathering should be a high priority for advocates of responsible fatherhood.

Other findings from the Mama Says Survey and the Pop’s Culture Survey with important implications for policy, practice, and personal decision making are those relating to work-family conflict. The respondents to both surveys considered “work responsibilities” to be the greatest obstacle to good fathering of those in a list of conditions often mentioned as important obstacles, and in the mothers survey the high emphasis on this obstacle cut across categories of education, race, ethnicity, and religiosity. Only a little over

half of the mothers thought that the father of their focal child effectively balanced work and family, and how well the mothers thought that the fathers balanced work and family was strongly related to their overall satisfaction with the fathers. And even many of the mothers who were generally satisfied with the father’s performance agreed that greater support from him would aid their own work-family balance.

Work-family conflict has received so much attention from social scientists, policy makers, and journalists that it is true in this case that hardly anyone needs a survey to tell them that it is an important topic with direct relevance to fatherhood. However, advocates of responsible fatherhood need to realize just how important the issue is so that they can allocate an appropriate amount of attention to it. After residential separation of fathers from their children and the mothers of those children, work-family conflict is arguably the next most crucial issue for the fatherhood movement to address.

## TECHNICAL APPENDIX

The online survey was conducted by the Office of Survey Research at the University of Texas at Austin using a sample of mothers provided by Survey Sampling International from an online survey panel. Of the persons asked to participate, 53 percent completed the questionnaire. Although the mothers were randomly selected from the eligible members of the panel (those at least age 18 with at least one child under age 18), the panel is not a random sample of any known population, being instead persons who volunteered for the panel. Therefore, even though the sample for this survey should be roughly representative of the target population, it is not a probability sample, and strictly speaking, statistical tests of significance are not applicable to its data. Such tests are often used on data from online surveys, but we do not use them here in order to avoid the appearance of greater rigor and precision of estimates than the sample can provide. We make some tentative judgments about whether or not some of the differences between compared categories are likely to have resulted from chance, but we do not assign specific probabilities.

The survey questionnaire asked respondents to think of their biological or adoptive child under age 18 with the most recent birthday, to be designated the focal child. All questions about a specific father on the survey refer to the father of that child. Although there was no specific screening on the basis of the relationship of that father to the child, the questions on the survey are based on the assumption that the father participated, at least minimally, in the parenting of the child. Those selected for the sample for whom this assumption was not correct, such as single mothers who conceived the child through anonymous sperm donation or those who for other reasons didn't know the identity of the father, were unlikely to have completed the questionnaire, and there is no indication in the data that any of them did so. It seems reasonable to assume that virtually all, if not all, of the fathers about whom the mothers reported were adoptive fathers of the focal child or biological fathers who had acknowledged paternity and assumed the role of father.

Appendix Table 1 shows some comparisons of the respondents to the *Mama Says* Survey with roughly comparable respondents to the 2006 American General Social Survey, a highly regarded face-to-face household survey that used exemplary sampling. The data from the two surveys differ little in marital status, moderately in race, and more substantially in education. Online surveys systematically under-represent persons at the lowest socioeconomic levels, and this one very substantially under-represents persons who have not completed high school while it over-represents those with some college but no bachelor's degree.

Survey samples that are unrepresentative in known ways are often weighted to correct for the lack of representativeness, but the data in this report are not weighted. Weighting is based on the assumption that respondents in an under-represented category are representative of all persons in that category—an assumption that is often reasonable but that doesn't seem to be so in the case of the few (28) respondents to this survey who hadn't completed high school. These respondents are probably near the top of this broad educational category, and the fact that they volunteered for an online survey panel while very few low-education persons do so means that they are almost certainly unrepresentative in other ways. Therefore, readers should keep in mind that the data from this survey cannot reveal variation in mothers' perceptions, feelings, and attitudes across the full range of the educational spectrum.

	<b>NFI Mothers Survey (1,531)</b>	<b>2006 GSS (819)*</b>
<b>Variable</b>		
<b>MARITAL STATUS</b>		
Married	<b>63</b>	<b>57</b>
Widowed	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>
Divorced	<b>12</b>	<b>17</b>
Separated	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
Never married	<b>18</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>RACE**</b>		
White	<b>69</b>	<b>62</b>
Black	<b>21</b>	<b>19</b>
Other***	<b>11</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>EDUCATION</b>		
Less than high school graduation	<b>2</b>	<b>20</b>
High school graduation, no college	<b>26</b>	<b>26</b>
Some college, no bachelor's degree	<b>48</b>	<b>30</b>
Bachelor's degree	<b>19</b>	<b>19</b>
One or more advanced degrees	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

APPENDIX TABLE 1. Demographic Comparisons of Respondents to the *Mama Says* Survey with a Roughly Comparable Sub-Sample of Respondents to the 2006 American General Social Survey — In Percent (Number of respondents for each category is given in parentheses.)

Due to rounding errors, some totals may not add up to exactly 100%.

\*Includes all female respondents ages 18 through 64 who reported having at least one offspring and at least one child under age 18 living in the household.

\*\*The percent Hispanic is 20.4. Most Hispanic respondents to this survey are included in the "white" racial category, but a few are coded as "black" and fewer as "other."

\*\*\*Includes "mixed" for NFI Mothers Survey.

## END NOTES

1. The survey instructions referred merely to “the father of that child,” but presumably that person was almost always the biological father or a man who adopted the child jointly with the mother.
2. For instance, see Paul Amato, Alan Booth, David Johnson, and Stacy Rogers, *Alone Together: How Marriage in America is Changing*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2007, pp. 27-28; Daphne Stevens, Gary Kiger, and Pamela Riley, “Working Hard and Hardly Working: Domestic Labor and Marital Satisfaction among Dual Earner Couples,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Volume 63, 2001, pp. 514-526; Theodore Greenstein, “Gender Ideology and Perceptions of Fairness in the Division of Labor: Effects on Marital Quality,” *Social Forces*, Volume 74, 1996, pp. 1029-1042.
3. For instance, see Norval Glenn, *With This Ring: A Survey of Marriage in America*, Gaithersburg, MD, National Fatherhood Initiative, 2005.
4. Although persuasive theoretical arguments have been made for the importance of marriage for good fathering (for instance, see Steven Nock, *Marriage in Men’s Lives*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1998), there has not been a thorough and systematic assessment of the empirical evidence on the topic. However, the evidence is extensive, though scattered, much of it being in the vast literature on the effects of divorce and its aftermath on children (notable examples being Judith Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce: A 25 Year Landmark Study*, New York, Hyperion, 2000, and Paul Amato and Alan Booth, *A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1997) and in the literature dealing with never-married (largely low-income) fathers (for instance, Jennifer Hamer, *What It Means to Be Daddy: Fatherhood for Black Men Living Away from Their Children*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001).
5. Wendy Manning, Pamela Smock, and DeBarun Majumdar, “The Relative Stability of Cohabiting and Marital Unions for Children,” *Population Research and Policy Review*. Volume 23, 2004, pp. 135-159; Cynthia Osborne, Wendy Manning, “Married and Cohabiting Parents’ Relationship Stability: A Focus on Race and Ethnicity,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Volume 69, 2007, pp. 1345-1366; Andrew Cherlin, *The Marriage Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today*, New York, Alfred Knopf, 2009, p. 164.
6. Glenn, *op cit*.





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