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- DEADBEAT BLACK DADS?
- MIKE TYSON - A QUESTION OF FAIRNESS
- A BALANCING ACT - THE TUBE AND THE BIG SCREEN
- THE GRAPEVINE: BOYZ II MEN



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What Do We Really Know About Child Support?

During the 1992 political conventions, vilification of "deadbeat dads" won enthusiastic applause from Republican and Democratic audiences alike. Today, when President Clinton talks about "ending welfare as we know it," he invariably couples his pledge with a promise to give this country the toughest child-support enforcement it has ever had. Last summer Bruce Reed, Clinton's deputy for domestic policy and co-chairman of a working group on welfare reform, said the most powerful impact the nation could make on welfare would be a crackdown on child support.

There is still more: When Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala spoke to the National Press Club in mid-1993 about welfare reform, the only detail she mentioned, twice, was tougher child-support enforcement. This myopic focus on trying to extract money from noncustodial parents spells bad news for us all.

The tough talk has been spurred by a widely quoted Census Bureau survey, "Child Support and Alimony: 1989." It said, "Five million women were supposed to receive child support payments in 1989. Of the women due payments, about half received the full amount they were due. The remaining women were about equally divided between those receiving partial payment and those receiving nothing. It also revealed that of \$16.3 billion due in court orders and legal agreements, only \$11.2 billion was paid. Deep in our hearts, we tell ourselves it's clear who is to blame for the failure to support children. And sometimes what is deep in our hearts pops out of our mouths. The prepared text of Clinton's acceptance speech at the 1992 Democratic Convention was appropriately gender neutral: "I do want to say something to those parents who have chosen to abandon their children by neglecting to pay child support: take responsibility for your children or we will force you to do it." At the podium, however, Clinton directed his wrath to "the fathers in this country who have chosen to abandon their children."

The tendency to see the failure to pay child support as somehow connected with being male reaches even the lofty New York Times editorial board. On July 17, the Times observed that more and more single women are becoming mothers by choice. Despite the fact that these mothers are regarding more and more fathers as disposable,

the editorial invokes the standard scapegoating: "The huge jump in the rates [of single, elective motherhood] also suggests the need for a more vigorous effort to track down fathers who refuse to pay support. As the number of unwed mothers grows, so does the number of deadbeat dads." [Emphasis added.] This reflexive, unreasoning criticism of fathers is not the province of liberals alone. On Aug. 28, 1992, conservative Rep. New Gingrich, R-Ga., told National Public Radio, "One of the things that we know historically and biologically is that males are designed to be relatively irresponsible. When you read about a 16-, 17-, 18-year-old kid going to jail as a criminal boasting that he's already had eleven children by ten different women, you know you have a society which is breaking down in its core values." It is curious that Gingrich is talking about 10 women and one man, yet his view of the problem centered only on male irresponsibility.

Our cultural suspicions, prejudices and outright hostility to men as parents form a powerful myth that deserves to be thoroughly debunked.

Let's start with the image of the uncaring, irresponsible male. From "Caring and Paying," a report by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, a pilot program that helps noncustodial fathers find work: "Contrary to prevailing stereotypes, the [noncustodial fathers] in our focus groups [in Harlem] expressed powerful feelings about men's responsibilities toward their families." From a May 30, 1992 New York Times article on a Manpower Demonstration program in Michigan: "These fathers seldom fit the stereotype of the deadbeat dad, the prosperous divorcee who lives in style while his ex-wife and children scrounge for necessities." From a 1990 Health and Human Services report, "The Changing Face of Child Support: Incentives to Work With Young Parents": "[Fathers of children born to teen mothers] typically are motivated to support their families, even when they are not married to their partners, and even though they earn disproportionately little and suffer from high unemployment. This finding contradicts the widely held notion that young fathers are able but unwilling to support their children." From the Institute for Research on Poverty, March 1993: "Recent research challenges the popular assumption that noncustodial fathers of children born out of wedlock do not pay child support simply because they refuse to. Indeed, framing the discussion of delinquent child support payments in terms of 'deadbeat dads' may oversimplify what is in fact a

(Support continued on page 60)

(Support continued from page 54)

complex matter." It is quite true that too many father-child relationships are not functioning as we wish they would, but as Manpower Demonstration Research Corp. says, "The reasons for nonpayment of child support are not well understood. We must guard against allowing our prejudices to rush into the vacuum of our ignorance."

A 1987 Health and Human Services report, "Young Unwed Fathers: Research Review, Policy Dilemmas and Options," says, "We know far less about young unwed fathers than about young unwed mothers. While no one denies their role in causing teen pregnancy, few have examined how young men respond to becoming fathers or consider how to help them meet the responsibilities of fatherhood." It is time we took a more intelligent look at what is happening between noncustodial fathers and their children. We might begin by observing an overlooked fact from the widely quoted Census report: almost 38 percent of absent fathers have neither custody nor visitation rights. It seems strange to call them by the subtly pejorative term "absent" when they have no right to be present. Another fundamental but overlooked fact is that the widely quoted Census statistics on child-support payments were based entirely on interviews with custodial mothers, with no attempt to verify the data or compare it with what noncustodial fathers might say. There is reason to believe the Census Bureau's numbers might be exaggerated. The pilot Survey of Absent Parents, a small-scale effort conducted in 1985 and 1986 and the only study to examine the noncustodial parents' point of view, found a 30-percent discrepancy between what noncustodial fathers say they paid and what custodial mothers say they received. Women who receive means-tested government assistance, after all, have a powerful incentive to under-report their income. Another fact worth pondering is that according to a little-publicized 1991 federal study, noncustodial mothers have a far worse record of child support compliance than do noncustodial fathers. "Custodial Fathers: Myths, Realities and Child Support Policy" says that "[F]athers who are owed child support are less likely to receive payments [than mothers who are owed support] with 47% receiving nothing, compared to 27% of custodial mothers receiving nothing." Confronted with this reality, do our minds fill with derogatory images of "deadbeat mommies" upon whom we must crack down? Or do we reflexively seek more sympathetic explanations of what must be happening to cause these women to choose to abandon their children? Let's indulge in a little sensitivity train-

ing for absent parents by imagining that the government has instituted an affirmative action program of what we might call "Paternal Supremacy." Under this doctrine, if the father decides during the pregnancy that he doesn't want to become a parent at this point in his life, he can secure an abortion. If, on the other hand, he wants the child, he can force the mother to become a parent, even against her will.

After his child is born, he can still change his mind about being a parent and place the child for adoption or foster care, thereby absolving himself of all further responsibility. If he decides to keep the child, he will receive a government check, medical insurance for himself and the child, food stamps and, of course, a primary relationship with his offspring. The mother will receive an order to fulfill her traditional female role by going to the father and children's home three days a week to cook, clean and shop for them, but she must leave before the kids return from school. (She is on a fixed schedule of how often she can visit them.)

If she fails to cook, clean and shop for the father and the kids, she will be rounded up, hounded and harassed and could even be thrown in jail. If the father interferes with her scheduled visits, nothing happens. No one cares about her desire to be a parent to her children. The authorities only care about the father's desire to see her cook, clean and shop. ("You owe it to your children," they tell her gravely.) Fully aware of his superior power position, the father treats the mother any way he wishes. If she starts seeing another man, for instance, he cuts off her visits with her child. Fully aware of her powerlessness, she becomes frustrated, resentful and totally uncooperative. She might fake an injury to avoid having to cook, clean and shop. She might even skip town. Somehow, we probably feel some sympathy for a mother living under the "Doctrine of Paternal Supremacy." We do not rush to the idea that we need to crack down on her. We probably recognize the need to change a system that turned a potentially loving and valuable parent into a despised scofflaw. Why do we regard fathers, who live under the Doctrine of Maternal Supremacy, differently? The current system, at best, is disinterested in the problems, feelings and emotions of men. As Freya Sonenstein of the Urban Institute writes, "Little is known about noncustodial parents—who they are, what their financial resources are, why many fail to pay child support. Should we seek answers to these questions?" Of course we should. Lack of this

information is a major stumbling block for developing a coherent and informed national child support policy, Sonenstein says. [Contemporary Policy Issues, January 1990] Dr. Sonenstein was the researcher who conducted the "Survey of Absent Parents" mentioned above. That effort was a pilot study to test the feasibility of a full, national study of noncustodial parents. Although Dr. Sonenstein found that the larger study would be highly feasible, the Reagan administration aborted it.

Similarly, in a Health and Human Services release dated April 9, 1992, former secretary Louis Sullivan announced that for the first time the Census Bureau would gather information from custodial fathers. But where is the report? It was due Dec. 31, 1992 and it's still not available. Answers about its fate are hard to come by. Perhaps we'd rather not know the truth if it costs us our cozy, familiar and simplistic stereotypes about how masculine nature rather than our treatment of men as fathers is the cause of our child support problem. As long as we substitute prejudices for understanding and hostility for insight, we are doomed to a child-support effort that is more an exercise in channeling anger than in helping lift children out of poverty.

The Urban Institute's Dr. Freya Sonenstein says that several high-priority policy questions emerged from her pilot study of noncustodial parents. Among them: What is the income potential of noncustodial parents for supporting their families? Until income data are available for a national sample of noncustodial parents, one cannot estimate how effective child support transfers could be for reducing poverty and dependence on Aid to Families with Dependent Children, commonly called welfare, among female-headed families. As bad as the current system's disinterest is, its outright hostility to men is far worse: from the 1987 Health and Human Services report, "Young Unwed Fathers: Research Review, Policy Dilemmas and Options": "Some of the procedures used by [child support enforcement] agencies in their dealings with young unwed fathers and mothers have created a perception of these agencies as hostile and punitive to fathers." There's more: "The emphasis of the government, and often of the mothers, on financial support alone may deter many young fathers from seeking personal contact with their children." From the MDRC's "Caring and Paying": "Besides educating the men about the system, there also appears to be a need to educate the system about men such as these. The inflexibility of child-support agency re-

sponses to their precarious and changing employment situations discourages these men from cooperating with the system." There is yet another little-discussed factor which adversely affects child-support payments to children receiving AFDC. To introduce it, let's return to the imaginary scenario in which women are ordered to cook, clean and shop. But now, because of the new factor, women are not ordered to cook, clean and shop for their own kids. No, a government-supplied domestic worker is now dispatched on a regular basis to do that. The mother is now ordered to re-pay the government by joining a crew that cooks, cleans and shops for residents of a state college dormitory or military barracks. Knowing her efforts have absolutely no bearing on the health, happiness and well-being of her children, her motivation to comply with the government's child support order is diminished even further, while her resentment and frustration moves up yet another notch.

Though this nightmarish script is entirely fictional, it is disturbingly similar to what is actually happening to men in real life today. Fathers whose children receive AFDC do not send their money to their children directly. Instead, they are expected to re-pay the government for its AFDC check. According to Manpower Demonstration, this Orwellian fact is not lost on the men who must live with it: One aspect of the child-support system that the men did understand, however, was the fact that court-mandated support payments to children on AFDC go primarily to reimburse the state. The men were keenly aware that payments to children on AFDC do relatively little to improve the children's welfare. The idea of paying child support to discharge a welfare debt does not sit well with some fathers, and has little to do with their sense of themselves as providers for their children. We might call the current child-support system "Socialized Fatherhood." Socialism failed in Europe because it destroys the connection between work and reward. Socialized Fatherhood will fail because it obliterates the connection between supporting a child and feeling the pride of parenthood. As the Washington Post said on Oct. 11, 1991, "The [Census Bureau] survey showed that despite years of federal and state efforts to strengthen child-support enforcement against absent fathers, with strong support from many women's groups, the proportion receiving only partial payments or no payments at all had declined only slightly since 1978." We've been "cracking down" for years. Do we need a bigger crackdown, or do we need a new ap-

proach? Let's consider the latter. The lack of work incentives for women is frequently cited as a fundamental problem in the current welfare system. Why, after all, should an AFDC mother work if she ends up with less money for her effort? What, we might ask, are men's incentives to work? Throughout history we have observed men undertaking Herculean efforts for their families. But if a rich man replaces a father as his family's breadwinner, what incentive does the father have to work? He sees himself as a failure and has little motivation to take care of even himself. Given the nation's current economic malaise and the decline in the agricultural and manufacturing jobs on which Black men relied for 100 years, it is impossible for many men, especially Blacks, to compete with the U.S. Treasury. Many women are finding Uncle Sam a much more desirable marriage partner than an actual man.

Donald M. Fraser, mayor of Minneapolis and president of the National League of Cities, stated the matter succinctly in August 1993: "The newest [AFDC] reforms are likely to make matters worse. If having a baby gets a mother onto a track which promises support, job training and perhaps even a government-sponsored job, the father, for whom no program exists, will be even more estranged." As bad as the disposability of fathers might become, it is already monstrous. Health and Human Services states in "The Changing Face of Child Support" that 50 percent of the mothers who are single at the birth of their children remain unmarried and do not identify the father, 20 percent identify the father but do not pursue paternity, 10 percent marry the father or release the child for adoption. Only 20 percent of the mothers who are single at their children's birth pursue paternity. Furthermore, decisions not to seek paternity may often be based on criteria irrelevant to the welfare of the child, such as the mother's or her parents' feelings about the father, reports Health and Human Services in "Young Unwed Fathers." How did it happen that men came to be so easily disposable? Though no one factor can explain the whole problem, I wish to call attention to a pernicious idea that we can rectify much more easily than we can fix the family-destroying effects of our stagnant economy. [End of Part I. To be continued in the next edition.]

Jack Kammer, former head of the Greater Baltimore Commission for Men, is writing a book about child custody and father-child relationships.