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# The Parenting Roles and Goals of Single Black Full-Time Fathers

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# The Parenting Roles and Goals of Single Black Full-Time Fathers

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African American men are rarely viewed, either in academic literature or in the popular media, as central to, or deeply embedded within, their families (Cochran, 1997; Gadsden and Smith, 1995; Madhubuti, 1990; Mirandé, 1991; Rutherford, 1988; Staples 1986). Of late, an increasing number of studies have attempted to rectify this situation by looking at married or cohabiting black men within two-parent families (e.g. Ahmeduzzaman & Roopnarine, 1992; Allen 1981, Bowman, 1993, Bright and Williams, 1996; Fagan, 1998; J. McAdoo, 1981, 1988a, 1988b, 1993; McAdoo & McAdoo, 1994; Mirandé, 1991; Taylor et al., 1988; Wade, 1994) with respect to their child-rearing values, provider role, or gender relations. Nevertheless, these are outweighed by studies (Barnes, 1987; Christmon, 1990; Furstenberg, 1988; Furstenberg and Harris, 1993; Hawkins and Eggebeen, 1991; Hendricks, 1981; Lerman, 1993a and 1993b; Lerman and Ooms, 1993; Marsiglio, 1987, 1991; Miller, 1994; Mott, 1990; Rivara, Sweeney, and Henderson, 1986 and 1987; Robinson, 1988) focusing on non-resident fathers, particularly teen fathers, who have come to epitomize what we mean when we say "black fathers." Following the trend, a burgeoning number of government programs on "responsible fatherhood" as well (Johnson and Sum, 1987; Pirog-Good, 1993; Savage, 1987), have focused on single black men who are nonresident fathers—or, more colloquially, "absent fathers."

This is not to say that this image of black dads as predominantly "absent" is entirely an effect of smoke and mirrors. High rates of divorce, cohabitation, and teen and non-marital births among African Americans have lent substance to this image as well.<sup>1</sup> However, the findings from a number of studies on nonresident

fathers (Danziger and Radin, 1990; Seltzer, 1991; Stier and Tienda, 1993; Taylor et al. 1990; Wattenberg, 1993) show that the lack of marriage or co-residence with the mother and child does not necessarily indicate non-involvement as a parent, as might be inferred from the term "absent." Apparently, black non-resident fathers have a higher rate than white and Hispanic non-resident fathers of visiting their children and partaking in primary care duties. In addition, they are more likely to give child support payments, though the payments tend to be lower. However, no study has looked at single African-American men who parent full-time. One might think such men are nonexistent, but most data indicate that they have been increasing over the past two to three decades. Eggebeen et al.'s 1996 study of National Survey of Families and Households data indicates that single-father families represented 15.5 percent of all single-parent families with children and that single-father families are increasingly formed by fathers who are young, have never been married, have low incomes and have fewer children. In each decade from 1960 to 1990, they found nonwhite children more likely than white children to reside in father-only families. Eggebeen et al.'s reading of census data indicated that by 1990, 3.3 percent of white children were in father-only families, while 5.6 percent of black children were. However, 1992 Census data indicated a smaller racial difference in black and white single fathering. That data indicated that 3.4 percent of black children 17 years old or younger lived in father-only households, compared to 3.3 percent of their white counterparts (Statistical Bulletin, 1993).

While the percent of single-father families is small among all races, the proportion of African American



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single-father families seems to be at least as high as, or higher than, that of white single-father families. Nevertheless, an increasing number of studies continue to focus on the parenting experience of white fathers. See Barker, 1994; Chang & Deinard, 1982; DeFrain and Eirick, 1981; DeMaris & Greif, 1992; Greif, 1982, 1983, 1985a, 1985b, 1990, 1995; Greif & DeMaris, 1989, 1990, 1995; Hanson, 1986a, 1986b, 1988; Hipgrave, 1982; McKee & O'Brien, 1982; Risman, 1986; Robinson and Barrett, 1986; Rosenthal & Keshet, 1981; Smith & Smith, 1981; and Tedder et al., 1981. Not one has focused on African American single fathers with full custody of children.

Hence, this research is an exploration of new territory in the growing field of fatherhood. This first set of 10 fathers was used as a pilot upon which to build further research. Hence, no hypotheses were proffered for testing. Instead, under the principles of "grounded theory" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), it was assumed that the findings—about the fathers' subjective parenting experience, about needed adaptations in the empirical process, and about the theoretical direction of future research on African-American fathers—would emerge from the research process itself. Nevertheless, while no theoretical questions were tested in this pilot, the questions asked of the respondents in the qualitative section of the study stem largely from a symbolic interactionist approach; that is, it was generally assumed that humans possess a self that can be an object of one's own thoughts and actions (Blumer 1969). This concept of self, and the behavioral scripts and identities that comprise it, emerges predominantly through relations with or reflections from others (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Hence, open-ended questions were largely designed to elicit the fathers' accounts about why they took custody, what factors motivated and/or enabled them to do so, how other family members or friends impacted their decision, how these fathers defined fatherhood, acted out their roles, and articulated and realized their expectations. This paper focuses on the parenting experience itself. Specifically, I looked at 1) the fathers' definition of and prioritizing of certain parenting roles or duties, 2) the desired behavioral goals they had for their children, and 3) how they enacted these roles in relations with their children, 4) what kinds of support and advice they sought in fulfilling these roles and goals.

### **Methodology and Sample**

This convenience sample of 10 fathers was recruited mostly in Milwaukee and Madison, Wisconsin,

through various local organizations, such as schools, neighborhood centers, parenting resource centers, and fatherhood projects, churches and Islamic centers, through related Internet websites, through the fathers themselves (snowball sampling) and through advertising in local alternative newspapers and radio stations. They are the first ten respondents in an ongoing ethnographic study of African-American single full-time fathers. While potential respondents are still being contacted, further interviews are pending more extensive grant funding.

Fathers were admitted to the study based upon their racial identity and custodial status. "Racial identity" is self-identified. Some fathers are biracial, but if they identified more with the African American heritage (as is often the case with biracial individuals), they were considered African-American for purposes of the study. "Custodial" is defined as the child residing with the father at least five days per week for most of the year. Custody may be formal, that is, legalized through the court, or informal, arranged by the parents or family without the courts' intervention. Custody may also follow a non-marital birth, divorce, adoption, or widowhood.

Fathers first filled out a quantitative questionnaire that elicited demographic information about themselves and their children and addressed their family background, parenting style and philosophy, existence and proximity of support system, distribution of household labor and childcare, and a limited number of measurable outcomes for child and father. Upon completion of the questionnaire, fathers participated in a two- to three-hour in-depth interview with the primary researcher or an assistant. Two of the interviews were conducted via the Internet, but the majority were conducted at a mutually agreed upon location, most often the home of the father. The interview included questions designed to explore the motivation and factors considered in choosing to parent full-time, definitions of and priority given to various parenting roles, satisfaction with choices made and outcomes. Interviews of these ten men occurred from the end of 1999 through 2000.

### **Sample Profile**

Table 1 lays out the major demographic characteristics of the fathers in this study. These men are far from the stereotypical teenaged fathers on which much of the literature on non-resident fathers focuses. While their ages ranged from 22 to 42 years old at the time of the interview, the vast majority of the fathers were over

**Table 1—Demographic Information on the 10 Fathers**

Father (pseudonym)	Age at Interview*	Age at first birth	Marital Status**	Family of Orientation+	Education	Current Income Bracket	# of custodial children++	Gender of custodial children	Age of custodial children
Don	40	28	D	2P	BA	>\$50,000	2	FF	11 10
John	24	20	NM	SP 6-10	HS	\$25,000-\$34,999	1	F	3
Larry	30	19	NM	SP >11	BA	\$25,000-\$34,999	1++	F	11
Steve	22	19	NM	SP 6-10	AA	\$15,000-\$24,999	1	F	2
Ronald	41	16	NM	2P	MA	\$35,000-\$49,999	2++	MF	16 14
Cory	40	25	D	SP >11	Some College	\$25,000-\$34,999	2	FM	14 11
Ray	42	32	D	SP >11	BA	\$15,000-\$24,999	1	M	10
Alex	32	30	NM	SP >11	HS	\$25,000-\$34,999	1	M	1
Richard	41	28	NM-A	2P	BA	\$25,000-\$34,999	1	M	6
Tracy	30	20	NM	SP 6-10	BA	\$25,000-\$34,999	1++	M	9

\*Current ages of father and age at first birth and ages of child may not coincide due to rounding.

\*\*All of the men are currently single. D=divorced. NM=never married. NM-A= never married, has custody through adoption.

+Family of orientation refers to the family structure in which the father grew up. 2P = two-parent household. SP = single-parent household, and the numbers refer to the number of years that the household was a single-parent household.

++designates that father has one or more children who are not in his custody.

30 years old. Twenty percent of the dads were in their 20s, thirty percent were in their 30s, and another fifty percent were in their 40s. In addition, ninety percent of the dads were at least majority age when their first child (not necessarily the custodial child) was born; 50 percent were in their 20s and 20 percent were in their 30s.

As to education and income, eighty percent of them had at least some college and most of them would be considered middle class and/or in white-collar occupations. Specifically, two of them (20 percent) had a high school diploma, two had some college, five had a bachelor's degree, and one had a master's. Twenty percent had incomes between \$15,000 and \$24,999, sixty percent had incomes between \$25,000 and \$34,999, one had an income between \$35,000 and \$49,999, and one had an income over \$50,000. All of them were employed full-time, as factory worker, plumber, state administrator, corporate manager, Air Force officer, elementary school teacher or social workers. Fifty percent of them held additional part-time employment, as sport coaches, building manager, taxi driver, or disc jockey.

Three of the fathers were divorced from the mother of the custodial child. Six dads had never married the mother, though most of the non-marital group had cohabited with the mother of the child for some period of time.<sup>2</sup> One dad, also never married, had custody through adoption. None was a widower. About 50 percent of the fathers had legal custody—that is, custody adjudicated by the courts. The other 50 percent had made informal arrangements with the mother through mutual agreement that father-custody would be best in their individual situations. Length of custody as a single father at the time of the interview ranged from 5 months to 12 years. Forty percent of the fathers had custody less than two years. Forty percent had custody for 2–4 years, and twenty percent had custody for 5 or more years.

The custodial children were diverse in regard to age and gender. There were thirteen custodial children altogether. Most of the fathers (70 percent) had custody of all of their biological children, but three (thirty percent) had other biological children of whom they did not have custody. Seventy percent had one custodial child, and thirty percent had two custodial children. The custodial children's ages ranged from one year to 16 years. Three (23 percent) of the children were under the age of 5, seven (54 percent) were young school aged (6–12 years old) children, and three (23

percent) were teenagers. A slight majority (seven of the 13) of custodial children were female.

### **Parenting Roles**

The expression of self involves role enactment (Zurcher, 1983). Roles provide guiding principles and expectations that shape behavior. Putting it in more dramaturgical terms, Goffman (1959) suggests that the self presents itself to others as if playing a role or roles upon a stage. The stage is everyday life, and the self continually constructs and reconstructs itself, improvising as necessary, through interactions with the other players on one's stage. Even the narration of self provides another opportunity to redefine one's self.

With these presumptions in mind, the fathers were presented in the quantitative questionnaire a list of six possible parenting roles and asked to prioritize them (that is, order them from one to six, with one being most important and six being least important) according to their own fathering experience. The six given roles were provider, nurturer, teacher, disciplinarian, authority figure, and friend. The term "role" was not meant to imply a locked social category that determines who the father is, but was used merely as a familiar prompt to help fathers identify various possible parenting responsibilities and conceptions.

This quantitative section helped discern the priority given to each role. However, the qualitative process helped sort out the way each role is defined and enacted on a day-to-day basis in the context of the parent-child relationship. Specifically, the fathers were asked to explain why they ordered the roles in the ways they did, to define what those terms meant to them, and to give examples of how they enact that role. They were also asked to add any other roles that might be important to them and to discuss what it means to be a "good father." It was acknowledged that the interview itself becomes a stage upon which the father both presents his self to the interviewer and simultaneously reflects on and crafts for himself the roles meaningful to him.

As shown in Table 2A, some patterns emerged from the questionnaire findings. Fifty percent of the fathers ranked provider as first in importance. This would appear to confirm other studies (McAdoo 1993) that have found the provider role to be an important part of African American male identity. However, if we combine the top two positions of importance, we find that 70 percent of the 10 fathers placed the role of nurturer in the top two positions, 60 percent listed provider in the top two positions, and 40 percent listed teacher in

the top two most important roles. At the other end of the importance scale, authority figure, disciplinarian, and friend each got 60 percent of the men placing those roles at 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> place (the two least important positions) in importance.

The men's level of education or income and their family background (i.e. single-parent or two-parent) did not appear to have much impact on which roles they rated in the two most and least positions of importance. However, the gender of their custodial children did have some effect. By comparing Tables 2B and 2C, one can see that only one of the fathers (25 percent) who had custody of boys only (4 such fathers) listed provider in the first or second position of importance, while all of the fathers who had girls only (also 4 such fathers) listed provider in the first or second position. Less of a split occurred on the role of nurturer, where all of boys-only fathers placed nurturer in either the first or second position of importance, and 75 percent of girls-only fathers did so.

A gendered pattern also emerged on the least-important roles. All of the boys-only fathers listed disciplinarian in one of the two least-important positions, while only 25 percent of girls-only fathers did so. Twenty-five percent of boys-only fathers listed friend as unimportant, but all of the girls-only fathers rated friend in the least-important positions. The only point of agreement was on authority figure, where 75 percent of both boys-only and girls-only fathers listed it in the least-important positions.

The ways the fathers define and play these roles might give us some clues to explain these various patterns. Although 60 percent of all fathers had put provider as first or second in importance (refer to Table 2A), the qualitative interviews indicate that most of the fathers did not have much to say about being a provider. Most saw it as a "given." Even those who placed it first in importance tended to view it as a necessary but insufficient factor in their parenting. As mentioned earlier, all the fathers were fully employed when they took custody, which may indicate that their ability to provide was an important, even if unconscious, factor in their making the initial custody decision. Even so, in their narrations provider takes a backseat to the other role possibilities.

In this study, for instance, Tracy, custodial father of 9-year-old Train (and non-custodial father of 2-month-old Tracy, Jr.), explained the relationship of the two most important roles:

*Well, number one provider. Because if you can't provide, you won't be here. They won't be here. Neither one of us would be*

*here. So I had to put that number one. And I think the nurturing—I think you must nurture kids. I mean, they always need that affection, tell them that you love them. I tell him everyday I love him. That's part of me nurturing him. I hug him before he goes to school. I hug him when he goes to bed. You know, give him a kiss on the cheek. He kiss me on the cheek. And that's something I want, you know, until one of us dies. Because just because you are men don't mean—they have to get out of that stereotype that men don't do those things. There's nothing wrong with that. I want to let him know that. Of course, I wouldn't kiss him on the lips, but the cheek is fine. That's fine.*

As to the gender differences on the provider role, one might speculate that the father-daughter relationship, more so than the father-son relationship, may replicate in the men's minds the traditional husband-wife relationship in which the husband is expected to provide for the wife. Or perhaps the fathers think that daughters are (or will be as they get older) more demanding consumers than are the sons. Two of the fathers said that their children complained that they didn't buy them enough things, and both of these fathers had daughters.

Nurturer, the most important role if the two top rankings are combined, was defined as "being there" (particularly in times of disappointment or joy), giving affection, and making sure children feel secure and know they are loved. These findings are also congruent with studies of black fathers in two-parent families. Most of those studies have found nurturance to be the predominant mode in father-child interactions (Bowman, 1993; McAdoo, 1981; but see McAdoo, 1985). Moreover, Allen and Doherty's (1998) study of adolescent single (non-resident) and Black fathers found that their respondents specifically used the phrase "being there" in defining what fathering meant to them.

Illustrative of this is Richard, adoptive father of Tommy, who had been in 10 foster homes before Richard adopted him. Richard ranked nurturing first.

*Tommy needed someone who would just love him. You know despite all the hollering, despite all the screaming, the bed-wetting, the bad table manners, just everything he was doing and going through, he needed someone just to love him. And so that was very important. And there were days I wanted to just pull my hair out, you know, but—that's the first thing I needed to make sure he knew that he was safe. He needed to feel safe, and so I did a lot of holding him. Holding him in my lap. And even sometimes for time-outs that he had to take, I would hold him for the timeout. And, you know, he needed that. He needed a lot of that. He needed to know I was going to be there.*

As mentioned earlier, fathers who had girls only or both girls and boys were more likely to rank nurturing slightly lower (no one ranked it in the two least important positions), but only one father spoke of this specifically in gender terms. Ronald, custodial father for 12 years of Jet, his 16-year-old son, and Carla, his 14-year-old daughter, spoke openly:

**Table 2A: Rankings of Parental Roles by All Fathers\***

Father (Pseudonym)	Provider	Nurturer	Friend	Authority Figure	Teacher	Disciplinarian
Don	1	2	5	4	3	6
John	2	1	5	6	4	3
Larry	1	2	6	5	4	3
Steve	1	3	5	6	2	4
Ronald	5	3	4	1	6	2
Cory	1	4	6	3	2	5
Ray	3	2	4	5	1	6
Alex	3	2	4	5	1	6
Richard	4	1	5	2	3	6
Tracy	1	2	3	6	4	5
% ranked 1-2	50	70	0	20	30	10
% ranked 5-6	10	0	60	60	10	60

*1=most important; 5 = least important*

**Table 2B: Rankings of Parental Roles for Fathers of Daughters Only\***

Father (Pseudonym)	Provider	Nurturer	Friend	Authority Figure	Teacher	Disciplinarian
Don	1	2	5	4	3	6
John	2	1	5	6	4	3
Larry	1	2	6	5	4	3
Steve	1	3	5	6	2	4
% ranked 1-2	100	75	0	0	25	0
% ranked 5-6	0	0	100	75	0	25

*1=most important; 5 = least important*

**Table 2C: Rankings of Parental Roles for Fathers of Sons Only\***

Father (Pseudonym)	Provider	Nurturer	Friend	Authority Figure	Teacher	Disciplinarian
Ray	3	2	4	5	1	6
Alex	3	2	4	5	1	6
Richard	4	1	5	2	3	6
Tracy	1	2	3	6	4	5
% ranked 1-2	25	100	0	25	50	0
% ranked 5-6	0	0	25	75	0	100

*1=most important; 5 = least important*

*I guess I wasn't built for some of the stuff that happened. I guess I'm saying that some women I feel are built to be more nurturing, to be more sensitive, to be more loving to her children. Whereas as a man I felt like I was as nurturing and as loving as I felt I could be. But at the same time I don't feel that I was quite as nurturing and sensitive with my daughter. I felt like raising her I didn't give her what she needed.*

While the difference between fathers of sons and fathers of daughters was small in regard to the nurturing role, Ronald's statement may indicate that fathers of daughters felt, rightly or wrongly, that daughters require a different degree or kind of nurturing than sons, a type that they as fathers could not fulfill or a type they are not comfortable giving. Ronald's concern that he was unable to give his daughter what she needed will be echoed later by other fathers.

Teaching was ranked high to middle in importance, and the fathers' accounts tended to indicate that several of them viewed teaching and nurturing as highly intertwined. Teaching can be accomplished through example or by conversation (or in parent lingo, lecturing). Most of the fathers viewed teaching in pragmatic terms, teaching daily living skills such as bathing, table manners, safety tips, and helping with homework. Ray, father of Kyle, put such teaching at the top of his list. He explained.

*Teaching is the end-all be-all of me as a parent. I think being a teacher is important, especially in the situation I'm in, I'm teaching him all things. Not just his academics. But I'm teaching him manners, common sense, how to think things out for himself. Like when we go bike riding through this park that's not too far from here. He gets in front of me, and I'm always saying, "When you ride a bike, never ride a bike blindly. Always look. Look for cars, look for cars coming out, look for people walking out. If you come up to a corner where it's a blind corner, like a building where you can't see what's coming, cover your brakes and slow down, because there could be another bike coming around the corner." You know, that type of stuff.*

Richard, a gay man who became an "instant father" when he adopted Tommy two years ago, placed teaching third. He discusses all the daily care taking that he felt he needed to teach Tommy, who was 4 years old at the time of the adoption.

*Tommy had a lot of things to learn. But I had to recognize that part of teaching is recognizing when this is not something we have to learn right now. And so, you know, at the beginning—a child who is four years old generally knows how to bathe himself. . . . Eating—he was very unaware and to some extent still is of what his body is doing. And so he would have food in his hair, all over his face, down around on the floor, on the table. There were different things he needed to be taught. He didn't know how to tie his shoes. He didn't really know how to button up things. And he still doesn't know how to dress himself nicely. And that's only because I think that's his male heterosexuality coming out (he adds with a laugh).*

At the other end of the importance scale, "friend" ranked low to middle. Fathers often saw friend in opposition to parental authority, and most of them did

not want too much of either. Consequently, some fathers discussed how they wanted to be a friend in the sense of hoping that their children would feel comfortable enough to confide in them and talk openly, particularly about sex. For instance, several fathers spoke as Tracy did,

*I think kids kind of get lost, especially at his age. And I think they need their parents to be their friend. You know, so he can just feel free, he can come and talk to me about anything. I talk to him about sex. I've been talking to him about sex since he was six years old—you know, about condoms, sex, I mean everything. I laid it all out on the line. I mean, I made sure he gets that, because I don't want him sneaking behind my back trying to be curious about something. That's part of my friendship with him.*

On the other hand, fathers recognized times when the perceived interests of father and child may split, and the fathers might need to call upon their parental authority. Steve, father of Jackie, explains: "We are friends, but not all the time. When I'm trying to teach, discipline, and provide, I'm not always her friend. She'll say to me 'You're not my friend anymore.' Then I say, 'I don't have to be your friend; I'm your dad.' But friend means that she trusts me, she tells me things."

Similarly, Ray's handling of church attendance also reflects this need to balance the seemingly contradictory roles of friend and authority. Ray's sister takes Kyle to church every Sunday, but Ray, who attended church as a child but is no longer "interested in getting my spirituality from Second and Butterfield (the location of the church)," does not attend with him. Ray says that other people and Kyle have asked why Kyle should have to go if his father doesn't. He answers:

*I made the decision not to go as an adult, and I tell him "This is how I run things. There's a lot of things you'll be able to do when you become an adult. But at this point there are times when I have to take on the role of parent and decide what's best for you." I used an example, I said, "I don't go to school with you. I don't go to your music lessons with you, but you are getting knowledge from both of these. You are learning something from them. And you don't have to have me sitting there with you."*

Despite the recognition that at times parents need to assert their authority, authority figure was ranked low on the scale by most fathers. Most fathers viewed authority somewhat negatively and as something that should be used as a last resort. Several made comments to the same effect as Alex, father of 1-year-old Alex Jr., who stated, "If you are doing the nurturing and the teaching and providing the discipline as a positive reward, then authority isn't necessary."

Interestingly, the two fathers who ranked authority in first or second place are fathers who have children with some behavioral problems; one father was Richard, the special-needs adoptive father of Tommy,



He actually defined an authority as “someone who gets you to do something you don’t want to do and when you’ve done it, you don’t realize you did it.” The other father who ranked it high was Ronald, whose teenaged daughter is in counseling. While we can’t determine the direction of cause and effect here, it is possible that parents who have children exhibiting behavioral problems feel more need to call upon the authoritarian role, thus indicating that a child’s behavior may be just as influential in shaping the parents’ roles as vice versa.

Related to authority figure was disciplinarian, which was ranked middle to low in importance (lower among boys-only families). Discipline tended to be defined either as punishment and correcting poor behavior or as cultivating consistency and good habits (closer to the definition of teaching). Nevertheless, the distinction in definition appeared to have no significant impact on ranking. Rather, as stated earlier, boys-only fathers tended to rank it lower than girls-only fathers.

In relation to discipline, fathers were asked specifically about the child’s participation in household chores. Although findings are mixed, most studies of white single fathers (e.g. Greif, 1985; Hanson, 1986a, 1986b, 1988; Smith & Smith, 1981) indicate that the fathers take on most of the household chores themselves, and children are second in use. Few hire non-family or use relatives. That general pattern is true here as well, except for the use of relatives.

Most of the men in this study do the majority of the housework. Their children contribute by keeping their rooms clean or taking out the garbage, but most of the fathers indicated that they wanted their kids to concentrate on school work and felt their kids were not ready to do housework, though one of the teen sons vacuumed in preparation for company while I was interviewing his father. Two of the fathers’ extended families lived in another city; consequently, they had no relatives to call upon, and two of the fathers consciously tried to avoid asking family for help because they felt their families had enough burdens to deal with. Two of the fathers with children under three were receiving at least 40 hours a week in childcare from the fathers’ mothers or sisters. The rest received less, but often regular, help (babysitting, laundry, meals, repairs) from various family members or from the child’s mom.

The fathers were also asked about the use of corporal punishment. Two fathers said they had never spanked their children, and one other father said he had only “whooped” his son one time. Six of the re-

maining seven dads said they used spanking on occasion, and the other father said weekly.

A number of the fathers had experienced a fairly high level of corporal punishment in their own childhoods. Several spoke of beatings with belts and sticks, being hit on the face and head, and having welts and bruises afterwards. Consequently, although the majority used spanking on occasion, even they tended to set some constraining criteria—such as only hitting the buttocks or legs, only using the hand, and/or only when the misbehavior is dangerous or illegal—in the use of corporal punishment. For instance, Larry, custodial father of Emily (he also has a noncustodial son whom he sees daily), said he spanked his daughter for having forged his name on a school permission slip. He elaborated:

*I never whooped my son yet, but I did whoop Emily one time. [He describes the forging incident that he learned of on a school morning.] I told her “we’ll continue this when I get home.” So after school, it was a Tuesday, Marcus [his son] was there. I gave her the spanking on my bed, and I told Marcus he better not sign my name like that. It hurted me, you know. I gave her about five licks. I don’t know if I was even hitting her hard. It hurted me to see her crying. I know, my mother never whooped me upside the head. That’s when child abuse comes into play, if you discipline your child out of anger. Then you can’t control how you swing. I had the whole day to calm down—I mean, maybe I would have given her some harder swings if I had done it right then and there.*

Most of the fathers had other ways of disciplining that they preferred to use first. Ray called his way of disciplining “humming.”

*I’m the kind of parent that is just always like a humming in your ear, if you’re doing something wrong. I know a humming in the ear can be almost as irritating as someone screaming. I say to him, “I can see you are upset with it, but if you are really upset about it, you’ll stop doing it because you don’t want to hear me say it again. I’m not going to scream at you about it.” But the point I try to make with him is that “if you dislike the hum, get on the stick, get with it.”*

Although some of the dads said they used “time-outs,” Steve said, “Putting your kid on a time-out—that’s not discipline. [Discipline] is explaining what you did wrong, trying to make her think about positive choices, what she could have done differently, being consistent.”

Richard, who said he looked to Bill Cosby and Felicia Rashad in *The Bill Cosby Show* as role models, said he liked to incorporate humor. He gave this example of how he dealt with Tommy’s misbehavior in first grade when he had just started going to a new school. Tommy had called the teacher a “bitch” several times in class.

*So finally I asked him, “What’s her name?” He said the teacher’s name, and I asked, “Are you sure? Sure it’s not ‘bitch’?” He*

said, "No, its Mrs. Smith," and I said, "Maybe her first name is 'bitch.'" And he said, "No, no." I said, "I know, you weren't talking to her. Maybe there was someone standing behind her, and her name was 'bitch.'" So, you know, I just made a big deal that one time. He knew I was not happy about this. And he hasn't done it since. Even when he hears it on TV now, he says, "They said the "b-word."

In addition to the roles suggested to them, several fathers brought up the idea of being a "father figure" to their sons. At least three of the five dads who have boys expressed the idea that a boy needs a man. Often the concept of father figure was associated with authority, the idea that a boy will more likely obey his father than his mother. Tracy, father of Train, said:

*I wanted to be there, you know, because—his mother hates to admit this—but I tell him to do something, he does it. She'll tell him, he'll do it, but he'll take his time about it. She'll have to tell him two or three times. And I don't think you should have to do that with no child. Just by having that male figure there, and having somebody who really loves you and cares about you—I see it in my son all the time. When I was nine years old, I was getting into things. I can leave him alone in this house for maybe an hour or two, and I come back to the house and the house is still the same. He won't do nothing.*

On the other hand, for fathers of daughters concern over the lack of a mother figure was not associated with discipline; rather it was more associated with friend or teacher. Five of the six dads who have girls said they regretted that they could not do the things that they assume mothers do with their daughters. For instance, Don, the father of two girls, said:

*I worry about not having a mother or female figure in the home for them to learn from. I will never be able to talk to them about what it is like growing up as a lady—from a lady's point of view. How do I talk to them about periods in a way that they'll understand? I can't play dress up like they will want to do.*

The frequency of this type of comment among fathers of girls likely helps to explain why "friend" was ranked lower in importance among girls-only fathers than among boys-only fathers. Although a few of the daughters participated in sports, many of the fathers still felt that there were gender-specific activities (playing dress-up was mentioned several times) and topics that the fathers could not fully or equally participate in or understand (menstruation and hygiene were most frequently mentioned). Greif's 1990 study of white single fathers similarly found that some fathers indicated discomfort with daughters' sexuality and sought outside female aid in discussing sex and hygiene. Because friendship frequently connotes intimacy, mutuality and empathy, these fathers may feel that at best they can attain only a limited friendship with their daughters.

### **Behavioral Goals For Children**

While there has been little research on the childrearing goals of black fathers, in general a num-

ber of studies (Bartz & Levine, 1979; McAdoo, 1979) have indicated that black fathers tended to have strict behavioral expectations of children and to seek obedience over assertive behavior on the part of the child. Comer and Pouissant (1992) suggest that such findings could be explained by the need for black dads to make sure their children not violate societal rules and bring hardship to their families. However, Allen's 1981 study of mothers and fathers in black and white two-parent families found most parents of both races sought honesty and both agreed that popularity was least desirable. Other studies seem to indicate that differences among desirable behavioral goals have more to do with class than race.

In this study, the fathers were given ten behavioral goals that they might desire for their children. Each goal was stated in a declarative statement: I want my child(ren) to . . .

*respect their teachers and other authority figures.*  
*obey me.*  
*be honest.*  
*be creative*  
*be polite and considerate of others.*  
*have compassion for others.*  
*succeed academically.*  
*be independent and self-reliant.*  
*have high self-esteem.*  
*get along with others.*

The fathers were asked to rank each goal as very important, somewhat important, not so important, or not at all important. Since fathers were not forced to rank each goal relative to the others, the result was a general consensus, as all of the goals were ranked by all of the fathers as somewhat or very important. As can be seen in Table 3, four of the fathers ranked all of the goals as very important; the remaining fathers ranked most of the goals as very important and a few as somewhat important. While this is in part a weakness of the methodology, Allen's 1981 study of mothers and dads in both black and white two-parent families found that black fathers were more likely to rank more childrearing goals as very important.

The goals that were most frequently ranked as somewhat important were creativity, willingness to try new things, and getting along with others. (Only one father thought that creativity was a necessary outlet, an enriching experience, or a hobby or skill that could potentially keep his child out of trouble.) The commonality among those three goals is that the fathers feared that children who might be free-spirited or too willing to try new things or too concerned about getting along with their friends might also be more sus-

**Table 3: Ranking of Behavioral Goals by Father and Gender of Child**

Father/MF	Respect Authority	Obeys	Honest	Creative	Polite	Compassion	Succeed in school	Independent	High esteem	Get along w/others	Try new things
Don/F	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	S	V
John/F	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V
Larry/F	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V
Steve/F	V	V	V	S	V	V	V	V	V	V	S
Ronald/MF	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	S
Cory/MF	V	V	V	S	S		V	V	V	S	S
Ray/M	V	S	V	V	S	V	S	V	S	V	V
Alex/M	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V
Richard/M	V	V	V	S	V	S	V	S	V	S	S
Tracy/M	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V	V
% S	0	10	0	30	20	20	10	10	10	30	40

ceptible to activities that might lead to problematic behaviors.

Although the quantitative data failed to sort out much variation among the most important goals, the fathers' own accounts privileged the goal of independence and self-reliance above the others. However, definitions of independence varied among the group. Ray elaborated on independence as a way of teaching kids to take responsibility for their actions. As a para-professional in the public school, Ray felt today's parents were failing to teach their children this form of independence.

*I emphasize to [Kyle] that I'm raising him pretty much as a parent in the wild would, in the sense that I'm raising him to be independent. Because I think one problem with a lot of kids—and you see examples of it with some of the young people out here—their parents are raising them to be dependent. Maybe not by design, but in the long run that's what it will turn out to be. You have to raise your children to one day be able to fend for themselves. So it's important to teach them little stuff like doing their clothes, cooking, and when he gets older you show him how to, you know, balance a budget. Even from the beginning, putting stuff up away from them so they won't break it. I never did that. I saw that as a learning tool. And even when they go to school, I think a sign of not teaching them how to be independent is not having them be responsible for their own actions. I see too many times parents, something happens at school, they want to come up and find out what was wrong. Like, for instance, if the school called and said Kyle was in a fight and they suspended him, I'm never going to ask what did they do with the other kid. I don't care. I want to deal with the issue—why he's fighting—when we get home. But we get parents who want to come in the school with six guns blazing. They are always coddling, making excuses. And then these same parents wonder why when their kids get to be teenagers and young adults why they keep coming back and can't seem to get on their feet. Parents are turning their children into victims.*

Ronald expressed independence in more pragmatic terms, as the ability to provide for one's need and take care of oneself by majority age.

*You know, I tried to program my children that "once you are 18, you are going somewhere. You know, when you get out of high school, I'm not taking care of grown people. You can go to college or in the service after high school, and there will be a room here for you during breaks. If you get a job, you are going to pay rent if you stay here or you need to look for your own place."*

Still another aspect was proffered by Richard, the son of a minister. He viewed independence in terms of freedom to choose one's own beliefs and values.

*That was something that I wanted to make sure—I don't believe in forcing religion on people, forcing them to believe something that you believe, simply because you believe it. So Tommy has not been baptized and it will not be my decision to have him baptized. Because I think that has to be his choice, his belief, his faith in God. With my parents, I was forced to go to church, forced to do this or that. There was no option.*

Fathers of daughters were as likely as fathers of sons to value independence, but they defined it differently. Fathers of daughters tended to see independence as freedom from financial and emotional dependence on men. For instance, Emily's father Larry said

*I want all that [all of the goals] for my children. I want kindness, creative, polite, and compassion. I do want them to succeed academically and financially. I want—especially for my daughter—I want her to be independent. I don't want her to be dependent on a man. Because lots of women are dependent on a man.*

These varied definitions of independence may help to explain the mixed findings in a few studies of Black fathers. Allen (1981) found that black fathers (as opposed to black mothers or white fathers or mothers)

made the least demands for independence of their children. Bartz and Levine (1978) found that Black mothers and fathers expected earlier autonomy from their children, and Baumrind (1972) found mixed results, particularly when it came to fathers' expectation of independence in daughters. The variation may very well be explained by the conflation of disparate behavioral goals in one concept—independence.

### **Sources of Advice and Preparation for Fathering**

Although about 50 percent of the fathers had done chores, sometimes babysitting, growing up in their families of orientation, only two fathers had done a substantial amount of household or parenting chores while they were residing with the child's mother. Consequently, only a few of the fathers said they felt prepared for being a full-time single father, and most of them said they found out they were mistaken. The ones who expressed the strongest feelings of being unprepared were those who had infants or those whose children had behavioral problems. For instance, Alex, father of one-year-old Alex Jr., echoed the complaints of many new parents.

*It was kind of a shock when I first started keeping him. He was a month old. And he would not go to sleep. Fifteen or twenty minutes and he was up. He'd sleep at the most /half an hour. He'd get up—at night, mainly at night. They get their days and nights mixed up. I'd take his bottle. I'd have to walk him around for half an hour. It was awful. That would go on the whole night. But as he gets older, it's getting better, but he don't sleep through the night yet. I guess it's just something that they go through. There's no remedy for it. I thought taking care of my nieces and nephews had kind of prepared me for that, but I didn't keep them when they were that young.*

Both Steve and John, fathers of toddler girls, said they were unprepared for potty training. Steve said, "I felt pretty well prepared. Growing up I used to babysit for my brother and cousins, change diapers, feed them. I knew some things, like browning flour for diaper rash. But I wasn't prepared for potty training. We are trying to potty train, and it has been an uphill, downhill kind of thing. It's starting to get frustrating."

Richard, the father of Tommy, who was a special needs adoption, recounted their first 3 weeks together.

*The first night, of course, I was infatuated. I just, I had this little kid, and they left him with me, [he laughs]. And they left him with me. He didn't want to go to bed by himself that night. So I laid on his bed until he fell asleep and then I got up and went back to my room. And then the next day was hell. It was hell for three weeks. But again, he was just being taken from one home and put in another, with no choice about it. Like I said, that first three weeks was just hell. I actually thought "Why did I do this?" Everybody told me this was going to be hard. And I said, "No, I can't go back and say I can't do this." Everybody would have said, "I told you so." So, you know, it was really those first three weeks. The thing is that I think I was also arrogant about it. I was doing so well in my career, and I was doing well in the*

*community as well. I was on the board of directors for the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Services Center in Colorado. So I was a recognized leader in the community. I was a member of the Governor's staff. I was a recognized leader in the recycling industry. You know. I think part of it was I was just arrogant. I thought, I can do this. Just bring this child on. I'll make the difference, [he laughs]. You know, all you have to do is give them food, and you know, give them love, and help them with homework. And I had no idea that that was one percent . . . . One of the things I told Social Services that I've learned in my short period of time of being a parent is that being a parent and making the decisions are all one big guess. And the thing you figured out this week will change next week. And you have to guess again.*

Despite their lack of preparation, none of the men sought out other single fathers for support or commiseration. This is somewhat distinct from studies of white single fathers, particularly Greif's (1990), who located most of his respondents through single-parent support groups. Only one of the fathers in this study took a parenting course, but that was court-ordered in order to get his infant son out of foster care. Two of the men are friends, live in the same apartment building, and socialize with each other and their children. While they do support each other in parenting, such as giving advice to each other's children, they had been friends since college and did not specifically seek each other out due to their parental status. Few proactively seek advice from anyone, because they prefer autonomy, they don't want to burden family members or they haven't felt a strong need for it. But when push comes to shove, the most frequent source of advice is their own moms, who were also most frequently cited as their role models.

The characteristics admired in mothers were their teaching of independence, exhibiting optimism or family values, and giving guidance. But the most admired characteristic was their staying power. Several fathers said something similar to Alex:

*She's a very strong person. I mean, to raise me and my five sisters pretty much on her own, through a lot of tough times. And to make it through the tough times, she needed a lot of strength. She's special. We didn't have a lot growing up, but she made us feel special. We didn't have a lot of material things and stuff like that, but she showed us a lot of love. So if she can do it back then, not making a whole lot of money and raising five of us, I should be able to do it with one.*

However, several of the men looked to less conventional sources for their parenting ideals or advice. As mentioned earlier, Richard cited *The Bill Cosby Show* as his role model for parenting styles. He explains: I try to take their attitude, that wise old sarcastic attitude in front of the children. That bitch thing, that was perfect. That's what they would have done in real life. They won't do it on TV, but they would have done it in real life. So they're someone I kinda look

to.” Another father of two daughters relies on informal chats with women on the Internet. For instance, he put out a question about whether he should let his 14-year-old daughter wear lipstick. Within a short period of time, he had dozens of replies ranging the gamut between yes and no. He uses their feedback to acquire different parenting methods and reasoning, as well as to gauge how realistic his expectations are.

The reader may have noticed that fathers did not mention their own fathers as role models or resources of advice. Only two fathers said that their fathers were role models. This is largely accounted for by the high percent of men who did not reside with their fathers growing up. Most of them said their fathers were not nurturing and served as a role model for what they did not want to be as fathers. Even most of those who grew up with their fathers did not refer to them as nurturing, and none of the fathers sought advice from their fathers. (See Coles, forthcoming, for further elaboration on this aspect.)

## **Conclusions**

While the small size and self-selected nature of the sample prohibit generalization beyond this group of fathers, there are some findings from this pilot study that are congruent with other studies of black fathers or that can point us in a direction for further research. The roles that these single fathers tend to identify with—primarily provider and nurturer—were found to be similar in studies (Bowman, 1993; McAdoo, 1981) of black fathers in two-parent families. In general, this sample of fathers placed high priority on what the literature (Erickson, 1964) would call “generative” roles—nurturing, providing, teaching, etc. This could be explained by the fact that all of these men were relatively mature as fathers; the majority being in their 30s when they took custody and being of majority age when they first became fathers. Late-timed fatherhood seems to be more conducive to generativity (Hawkins et al., 1995).

The lesser importance placed on authority figure and disciplinarian would seem congruent with emphasis placed on nurturer, but the downplay of the “friend” role would not. A possible interpretation is that fathers saw friend as the opposite of authority figure and did not desire either extreme to predominate in their parenting style. Moreover, it was fathers of daughters who tended to give less weight to friend, as they thought they would have trouble relating to their daughters as friends.

The apparent differences among fathers’ choice of roles due to characteristics of the custodial child, particularly gender, but perhaps also behavioral problems of the child, should be pursued in further research. For instance, in addition to the difference on the friend role, girls-only fathers were more likely than boys-only fathers to adopt the provider and disciplinarian roles. Moreover, the two fathers with children who were experiencing some behavioral problems were the only ones to list authoritarian figure in the top two most important positions. These suggest the possibility, as suggested by Hawkins et al. 1995, that certain types of children may more likely elicit certain parental roles, rather than parenting styles unidirectionally shaping children’s behavior, as is often assumed.

The results also indicated a general consensus on the behavioral expectations fathers had for their children. All of the fathers had high expectations for their children. However, independence and self-reliance seemed to be the goal most sought after. Creativity, getting along with others, and willingness to try new things—were the least desirable, perhaps because they seemed to be the ones most likely to support behavioral deviance and yielding to peer pressure. However, the structure of the questionnaire format for prioritizing goals needs to be modified to identify degrees of variation among the most important goals. Such forced prioritizing might indicate whether there is any correlation between the chosen roles and the behavioral expectations.

In terms of role models and other sources of role definition and advice, it was generally found that fathers’ mothers were the primary source of positive symbolic meaning and advice, while fathers’ fathers were least. Other research (Daly, 1995) has likewise suggested that children do not appear to imitate people of their own gender more, rather they are just as likely to model particular behaviors from a variety of sources rather than particular individuals. It is noteworthy and ironic that while mothers are cited as the primary role model for the fathers, the fathers of daughters still assumed that they would not be able to serve as sufficient role models for their daughters. The fact that men saw themselves largely in terms of providing and nurturing indicates either that they observed and modeled these after their mothers, who were doing both, and/or that these roles are driven predominantly by a “viscerally felt absence” of those characteristics in their own fathers.

The use of other sources of role models and advice for parenting (such as the broadcast media and the Internet), while infrequent, were still more cited than parenting books or support groups. None of the men were interested in seeking out a support group, and this is somewhat congruent with Allen's 1981 study comparing black and white mothers and fathers. He found that black fathers were least likely to have sought parenting advice from books or magazines. Whether the use of the Internet or television is an increasing trend for all parents of the technology age or whether black single fathers, in particular, find these venues more tolerable than others would be an avenue to pursue.

While the fathers' family of orientation (that is, coming from a one- or two-parent family), education, income, or previous marital status (i.e. divorced or never married) did not appear to be major factors in their choice of roles or behavioral expectations, the effect of those factors would be better articulated in a larger sample. The importance of combining both quantitative and qualitative data is highlighted in this study. Alone, the quantitative data would lead to the conclusion that the provider role was held as most important.

While the qualitative data didn't contradict this, the fathers' discourse places more emphasis on the other roles, particularly nurturing. In addition, qualitative data allowed discernment of variation in role definition, e.g. the various definitions of independence or discipline being defined either as punishment or as cultivation of consistency. Finally, while the quantitative data failed to articulate variation in ranking of behavioral expectations, the fathers' discourse clearly spotlighted independence and self-reliance as a sought-after characteristic in their children.

The main conclusion drawn is that these fathers were indistinct from most parents in most ways. They viewed their role as parent to be multi-faceted and adaptive to the personality and life course of their particular child. The fathers, particularly those of daughters, worried that they might not be able to meet all the needs of their children. They saw parenting as a trying but rewarding process, which in the end would produce a child who would be productive in society, able to live life fully after their parents' obligations had been met, and who would make the fathers feel that it was, in the end, all worth it.

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## **Notes**

1. The rate of teen pregnancy has been declining among African Americans in the last few years, and one of the main contributing factors in the apparent rise in the proportion of non-marital births among African Americans is the declining rate of marriage and fertility rates among married Black women.
2. This is just slightly different from U.S. Census figures (Cochran, 1997) that estimate that 23 percent of Black custodial fathers are divorced and 54 percent are never-married.