



## **Co-Parenting: Opportunities and Challenges for the Child Support Program**

*by Michele Ahern*

Two parents are better than one. With research that supports this statement in hand, the New York City Human Resources Administration's Office of Child Support Services explored the role of the child support program in promoting co-parenting relationships during its October 2019 conference.

Frances Pardus-abbadessa, Executive Deputy Commissioner for the New York City Human Resources Administration's Office of Child Support Services (HRA OCSS), provided a framework for the conference, citing some sobering statistics about children raised by a single parent. She pointed out that we all know children need more than money to prosper. They need parents who are attentive, loving, and involved. A substantial and compelling body of research confirms that children have better outcomes when they are supported by both of their parents, even if the family isn't intact. Involved fathers are more likely to pay child support. For low-income families in particular, when fathers are able to pay, child support is a vitally important source of income, lifting hundreds of thousands of families out of poverty each year.

"As policy makers and practitioners whose life work is to support families and improve outcomes for children, we cannot ignore the research – we must act," stated Pardus-abbadessa. "In fact, for a host of reasons, the child support program should take a leadership role in this work. We should not be daunted by the challenges, but instead we should allow ourselves to imagine how it could work in the child support program." Addressing the attending researchers, service providers, academics, government officials, and policy makers, she concluded, "We have an opportunity to have a true two-generational impact to reduce child poverty and improve outcomes for children. We should together figure out how to make this happen in a substantive and sustainable way, learning from the few programs that are paving the way by showing that it can be done safely and that it works."



*NYC HRA Office of Child Support Services Executive Deputy Commissioner Frances Pardus-abbadessa introduces the conference topic of co-parenting.*

A leading researcher on poverty, low-wage work, and family life, Dr. Kathryn Edin, co-director of the Bendheim-Thoman Center for Research on Child Wellbeing at Princeton University, delivered the keynote address. Edin co-authored *\$2.00 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America* and *Doing the Best I Can: Fatherhood in the Inner City*. Edin is the co-principal investigator for the [Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study](#), a long-term national study that began in 1998 and includes some 5,000 children in 20 large U.S. cities. Her years of fieldwork and direct in-depth observation have addressed the context and concerns of low-income women, men, and children. Edin emphasized the evolution of families today with unmarried parents having complex households with new partners, half-siblings, and/or parents with children by a different partner.

Edin asked participants to reimagine child support as a family-building institution. With its enormous reach and broadly conceived boost to child wellbeing, the child support program can capitalize on dads' desire to be involved. Her inductive analysis of interviews with 428 low-income noncustodial fathers of 759 children from four metropolitan areas pinpointed the dominant words the fathers used to describe formal child support, informal child support (cash), and in-kind child support (direct provision of goods or direct payment for services such as child care). For formal child support, descriptions more often included the words "court," "took," "pay," and "jail," indicating a loss of power and autonomy. For informal child support, the words "agreement" and "give" were used more frequently; and for in-kind support, "got," "need," and "buy." Intervention principles to restore the legitimacy of child support in the eyes of many noncustodial parents include 1) economic security, 2) power and autonomy, and 3) recognition as valued members of the community.



Keynoter Dr. Kathryn Edin shared her ideas for restoring power and autonomy to parents.

Economic security would enable every father to participate in the system. Edin proposes to implement the December 2016 federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) [final rule](#), deal head on with multiple partner fertility, ease the process for modification, and direct funds to enhancing noncustodial parents' ability to pay. To restore power and autonomy, she suggests inviting new parents to participate in co-parenting training, allowing parents to work cooperatively to set awards, and encouraging joint custody. She suggests allowing parents to agree to informal and in-kind contributions and ending cost recoupment. To make noncustodial parents feel valued, she proposes that "co-parent" be recognized as a key social role, noncustodial parents be treated with dignity, parenting time agreements be included (with good-cause exemptions) with cooperative agreements, and commitment to parenting ceremonies bring together the two sides of a child's family in celebration.

Data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study supports the importance of consistent father involvement. Spending time with the biological father in middle childhood is associated with reduced internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Higher levels of father engagement are associated with reduced delinquent, internalizing, and externalizing behaviors. Youth who engage in activities with their fathers—even though they do not live with them—have fewer

problematic behaviors. These improved outcomes for children clearly make the hard work of integrating co-parenting into child support worth the investment of families, society, and the child support program.

Dr. Jessica Pearson, director of the Center for Policy Research (CPR) in Denver, also presented. Pearson noted the challenges that unmarried families in the IV-D program face and the importance of father engagement and co-parenting for their children. Both Edin and Pearson challenged the child support program to address the significant body of research confirming the benefits to children of relationships with both parents, and particularly with fathers, whether they live with their children or not. Pearson pointed out that with 1 million new child support orders annually in the United States, 17 million children are affected by IV-D program policies. While the U.S. has experienced a dramatic increase in the number of nonmarital births and a drop-off in the involvement of unmarried fathers soon after the birth of their children, few jurisdictions help child support families with parenting time or co-parenting.

Pearson's presentation included results from CPR's projects to address parenting time in child support cases in Colorado, Texas, and Tennessee. She also identified approaches that some states and local child support agencies and courts use to establish parenting time for unmarried parents with attention to safety. She cited the findings of the positive effects of paternal engagement in numerous studies, including increased behavioral adjustment, academic achievement, financial contributions, and mother-infant attachment quality, along with decreased delinquency, aggression, depression, anxiety, economic disadvantage in low-income families, and costs to government and taxpayers.

CPR's study compared parents in Colorado, Texas, and Tennessee who had problems with access and visitation. Parents were randomly assigned to receive two different treatments. The high-level treatment group participated in brief facilitation and mediation interventions to address



*Featured researcher Dr. Jessica Pearson outlined why father engagement and co-parenting are important to children.*

their problems. The low-level treatment group was mailed printed information on resources in their community that they could contact for help. The effects of the two interventions were studied by examining records maintained by project staff, conducting telephone interviews with parents, and reviewing child support payment records in the 12 months prior to and following parent assignment to the two treatment groups. An analysis of this data showed that brief facilitation and mediation interventions were effective and produced positive

outcomes. Parents in the high-level treatment group were able to produce parenting time plans most of the time, they exhibited high rates of user satisfaction, their payment of child support improved, and they reported higher levels of parent-child contact. On the other hand, parents in the low-level treatment group did not produce parenting plans or achieve higher rates of child support payment or improvements in parent-child contact.

Various approaches to establishing parenting time in child support cases are in place around the country; Pearson noted standard schedules, self-help plans, mediation and facilitation, and

discussed different approaches taken in several states. For example, comprehensive parenting services are integrated with child support establishment in the Hennepin County District Court in Minneapolis. The Honorable Bruce Peterson, who helped establish Minnesota's Co-Parenting Court, addressed the group and explained the outcomes for families his program was seeing. Two-thirds of the parents referred to co-parenting workshops completed the sessions and more than half completed parenting plans. Couples unable to agree on a parenting plan are provided mediation and family group conferencing services. Both mothers and fathers who need social services are referred to providers for case management.

This high level of service is expensive, requires a strong network of community resources, and experiences high levels of attrition, Pearson explained, but also produces high levels of user satisfaction and increased payment of child support by fathers who complete the parenting course.

Standard parenting plans are used in Texas, Florida, and Indiana. These standard schedules are limited in their "one size fits all" framework, but can be implemented at the state or local level and assist large numbers of families with no cost or delay, according to Pearson. For example, Patterson Poulson, the case and order establishment process manager in the Florida child support program, explained state legislation that went into effect January 1, 2018, whereby eligible parents are notified that they can agree to a parenting time plan during the establishment or modification of an order. Ineligible parents include those who do not reside in Florida, whose child does not reside in Florida, who have an active nondisclosure relationship, or who are incarcerated.

Pearson noted that some states offer self-help options, such as interactive parenting plans in Oregon and Colorado; telephone hotlines in Texas, Indiana, and Kentucky; a parenting time calendar app in Indiana; and a virtual legal clinic in Colorado. Self-help approaches can yield detailed, customized plans and assist large numbers of families with minimal cost or delay, but usage rates are low, some parents want more help, and court orders require complex extra paperwork and filing fees.

The mediation and facilitation model is another approach, with variations among states. For example, this model is court- and community-based in Illinois, IV-D agency-based in Colorado and Ohio, and virtual in Colorado. Sheila Murphy-Russell, director of the DuPage County Family Center outside Chicago, provided an example and described on-the-spot co-parenting services in Parentage Court with staff offering the parents mediation, parent education, conflict management, and supervised parenting time. The family center handles 380 to 400 mediation cases a year of never-married parents, of whom 75% to 80% reach agreement on parenting time, and 70% to 75% complete the parent education course. Pearson outlined the strengths of the mediation approach as leading to agreements generally in 60% to 80% of cases, resulting in more child support payments and more parent-child contact, along with user satisfaction. The disadvantages of these programs are their expense, low use, and high dropout rate.

Pearson spoke of co-parenting's safety issues in cases with domestic violence. The safety protocols she enumerated were: 1) partnering with a local domestic violence agency to review policies and materials and to build referral relationships, 2) training child support enforcement staff, judges, mediators, and others on the impact of domestic violence on victims and children, and 3) establishing safety-focused policies and procedures to inquire about safety at multiple points during application and processing, inviting disclosure, and ensuring victims can opt out.

Despite the fact that children do better when they have positive relationships with their father and that, for many parents, brief interventions help to improve child support, parent-child

contact, and co-parenting, Pearson concluded that family law in the U.S. does not address the needs of unmarried parents. She proposed increased access and visitation grants and IV-D funding for parenting time. To address the two-tier system of married and unmarried parents, Pearson recommends extending to unmarried parents any mediation and parent education services offered to divorcing parents. She also suggests auditing agency settings for a father-friendly environment and creating multi-agency fatherhood councils for involving fathers in all family and children programs such as child support, child welfare, maternal health, early childhood, education, and court programs.

Both Edin and Pearson presented compelling research and recommendations at the HRA OCSS policy conference, initiating a dynamic exchange of ideas. The day was well spent exploring the importance of two-parent involvement in long-term positive outcomes for children and considering the crucial role the child support program can play in improving children's lives and futures by facilitating co-parenting.

*Michele Ahern is the Assistant Deputy Commissioner for Enforcement Operations for New York City's Office of Child Support Services. In this role, she is responsible for the appropriate application of administrative and judicial enforcement remedies; developing employment programs to assist low-income noncustodial parents; and identifying new strategies to increase collections. Michele is a member of NCSEA's Board of Directors and co-chair of NCSEA's Legislative Education Sub-Committee. Over the course of her career, Michele has held both policy and operational roles in child support and related social service programs, both in New York and in the federal government. She has served as the Chief Advisor to the Commissioner of the NYC Human Resources Administration, the City's principal social services agency, and as a senior budget analyst at the federal Office of Management and Budget.*

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