

Chapter 15

Beating the Odds: How Ethnically Diverse Fathers Matter

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“My dad’s my biggest hero, because I’m important to him, I can trust him and he trusts me, and it’s like I can . . . I can talk to him about personal things and all that, like when I have a problem.”¹ These are the words of the 16 year-old daughter of Jorge, a father of four, who has spent the last three years as a single father of two teenage girls, during the time he has worked to obtain visas for his wife and two children who remain in Mexico. Jorge works second shift, but he doesn’t let that keep his daughters from spending time with their dad. The girls have mentioned that they often wait up for him, and that when he’s not at work they’re never apart. Additionally, Jorge enjoys showing the detailed painting and decorating he did to make his home warm and *bonita* (attractive) as a surprise for his daughters when they first came over from Mexico. As a father, Jorge exemplifies the critical efforts that many ethnic minority fathers are making to show love and be involved in the lives of their children, despite sometimes challenging circumstances.

A discussion of why fathers count would be incomplete without a better understanding of how ethnic minority fathers matter to their children and families. We believe this is true in part because of their increasing presence in the United States. For example, Latino, African American, and Asian American fertility rates are considerably higher in these ethnic families than in most European American families, and are expected to account for as much as 90 percent

of all births in the next fifty years.² In fact, ethnic minorities are expected to account for over 50 percent of the U.S. population by 2050, with Latinos becoming the largest ethnic minority group in the United States.³ Although much energy has gone into the study of fatherhood in the last two decades, understanding of the experiences of fathers of color has received relatively less focus.⁴ As fathers of color, men in these ethnic families may differ in the cultural values or backgrounds they bring to parenting and this deserves greater understanding. Additionally, fathers of color face many of the same issues and challenges that all men who become fathers face, and need to be included in discussions of fathering.

Fathers of color typically include men with the experience of being born or raised in families of diverse ethnic heritages. There is a great diversity of ethnic and immigrant experiences in the United States. Fathers of color may include men of varying ethnic backgrounds, including Japanese, Native American, Greek, Russian, or other family origins. Despite this diversity of fathers' experiences in the United States, Latino and African American fathers numerically account for the largest number of fathers of color in the U.S. Our discussion will thus somewhat focus on men from these two groups, but we also believe that much of what we present in the chapter is equally applicable to fathers from other ethnic groups as well as fathers who are recent immigrants. In this chapter, we explore some of the similarities and differences among fathers of color, demonstrate the contributions of Latino and African American fathers in the lives of their children and families, and discuss some of the hurdles that many of these men face to being involved fathers. We also propose several practical ideas to help others understand and appreciate the contributions of these fathers.

Understanding the Lives of Ethnic Minority Fathers

How would you stay involved in your children's lives if they lived thousands of miles away in Mexico and you lived in the United States? Or how would you manage things if your ex-wife and her parents wouldn't let you be around your kids? Many ethnic minority fathers have had to develop alternative ways of being meaningfully involved in their children's lives. Such extenuating circumstances and trying situations may seem insurmountable to some, yet we don't have to look far to find positive examples of fathers who nurture and provide for their children in even the most difficult of conditions. In addition, many ethnic minority fathers have unique yet valid perspectives that may shape the ways they father and oftentimes define their family life. Thus in order to provide the best future for the growing numbers of ethnic minority children in this country, we ought to be sensitive in understanding and supporting these fathers in diverse contexts. We briefly explore five key points that can be useful in understanding ethnically diverse fathers and appreciating some of the factors influencing their efforts.⁵

Availability of Material Resources

Some ethnic minority fathers may lack material (economic and other physical) resources that would facilitate greater physical involvement with their children. These ethnic minority fathers often find themselves with restricted levels of economic assets and limited access to other material resources such as housing, time, computers, or community institutions (recreation centers, parks, and libraries).⁶ For example, African American and Latino fathers are similarly represented in poor urban neighborhoods, with their related challenges of social deprivation, criminal dangers, and lack of opportunity.⁷ Ross Parke and his colleagues have shown that these poor neighborhoods can influence the ways parents interact with their children and have adverse effects on child outcomes.⁸

Poverty is also a real concern for families in the African American and Latino communities. In 2000, 24 percent of African Americans and 23 percent of Latinos lived below the poverty line, while only 8 percent of Caucasians lived in poverty.⁹ Also, studies have consistently confirmed that economic hardship is associated with reduced levels of family functioning (e.g., negative interactions).¹⁰ For example, Simons and colleagues have shown economic hardship is related to heightened family conflict, negative parent-child interactions, and overall unhealthy family interactions.¹¹ Stresses related to working long hours for inadequate pay can at times spill over into parenting behaviors and other interactions (e.g., irritability or aggression) in the home.¹² Certainly, however, many fathers find ways to successfully navigate these outside pressures while raising their children. Yet we would like to emphasize that some ethnic minority fathers are in real need of economic or material support beyond that which is currently available. It is important that we are mindful of the contexts and day-to-day hassles that are experienced by some of these fathers, so that we can be part of the solution in helping these fathers to succeed.

Development of Human Capital

Some ethnic minority fathers lack the human capital (e.g., education, skills, abilities) that would assist them in being more actively involved in the lives of their families. Some of these fathers have come from certain situations that may have made it more difficult to acquire education and other skills, which in turn may complicate their paternal roles. For example, some fathers struggle to help their children with their school assignments. Illustrating this point, some Latino fathers have reported that they feel less able to be involved in their children's education than they would like to be, due to their own limited English abilities or (in some cases) limited formal education. Recent data indicate on average only 57 percent of Latino fathers have

graduated from high school and the number of graduates may be even lower in economically depressed, urban areas.¹³ In addition to these academic issues, many immigrant fathers struggle in their roles as parental advocates for their children in institutions that are often dominated by teachers and administrators of other ethnic groups (generally European American). Cultural differences in gender roles also play a critical role in determining how comfortable (or uncomfortable) these fathers feel as they try to understand and negotiate various educational systems.

The fact that many ethnic minority fathers have a more limited grasp of the English language than their children, can exacerbate the “disconnect” most fathers experience as their children reach the teenage years. For instance, limited English abilities can make it harder for these fathers to know where their children are and what they are doing on a daily basis. Moreover, limited language abilities may make it difficult to share interests or at least be involved in the interests of their children.

On a different note, some ethnic minority fathers may not have grown up with positive paternal role models, and may at times have difficulty feeling successful as fathers. Though this may be the case for fathers of any ethnic group, family structure and socio-economic features often make father absence more prevalent among ethnic minority families.¹⁴ On the other hand, some ethnic minority fathers struggle to realize the expectations others hold for them in terms of the way they should be as fathers. In fact, fathers struggling to surmount these issues have increased and prolonged stress in their lives, and are at particular risk for physical and emotional problems (i.e., depression).¹⁵ We would like to emphasize that ethnic minority fathers are not less resourceful or less able; they are just more likely to have struggled with poverty, poor

options for education, and the lack of employment opportunities, which may have made gaining certain skills and education more difficult.

Support and Social Capital

The amount of “social capital” that ethnically diverse fathers can count on varies over time and according to certain contexts and circumstances. *Social capital* refers to support that fathers receive from their interactions with family members, friends, neighbors, and other members of their communities.¹⁶ Social support can influence the means by which a father interacts with his children in various ways. First, family and friends can have both positive and negative influences on fathers. For example, a father may receive a good deal of informal support from other fathers with whom he plays basketball. Yet, at the same time these same individuals may give bad advice or become such a distraction that they detract from the time a father spends with his child. The same thing can happen in any number of social support groups, from the poker table or bar to the Rotary club, country club, or religious group. Positive messages can be mixed with less healthy messages, which can lead to ambiguities in terms of the way a father should interact with his family.

Second, family members can act as “gatekeepers” in disallowing fathers from being involved in their children’s lives.¹⁷ Especially common among non-resident fathers, gatekeeping by a child’s mother or other family members is often related to inadequate economic support on the part of the father or to other factors that lead to relationship conflict. In this way, adverse economic conditions or heated relationships can have unpleasant effects on fathers’ abilities to be involved in their children’s lives.¹⁸ Similarly, contextual factors such as imprisonment or migration may also reduce social capital and make it more difficult for fathers to maintain relationships with their children.

Due to other contextual factors such economic conditions, cultural characteristics, and family structure differences some fathers grow up with few positive fathering role models. For instance, many Asian American fathers have grown up in homes where they felt very distant from their fathers, and as a result some of these fathers indicate they have difficulty navigating a nurturing and warm relationship with their children. Alternatively, many ethnic minorities have grown up in single parent homes, where they have had few reliable models of how to be involved dads. We realize that parenting is a challenging prospect regardless of ethnicity or cultural heritage, and we acknowledge that support groups of all types can be helpful. We suggest, however, that fathers balance the time and energy expended while participating in outside social activities with those required for healthy involvement in the home.

Diversity Among Ethnic Minority Fathers

Great diversity is found among ethnic minority fathers in terms of their values, cultural characteristics, and socio-economic status.¹⁹ This diversity exists both within and between various ethnic and cultural groups. By culture we mean the shared behaviors, beliefs, and institutions (e.g., religions) of a particular group of individuals, and by values we refer to the specific beliefs and standards held by an individual or group of individuals. Many fathers from similar ethnic minority groups share specific cultural attributes, yet some fathers exhibit an even greater range of differences in terms of their values and actual ways they father within these ethnic groups. For instance, while we may more easily think of differences between Latino and Asian American fathers, in practice we may find more differences within and across specific subgroups of Latino fathers (e.g., Mexican American versus Salvadoran) than we might expect. Considering the diversity within ethnic groups suggests that even fathers within a specific ethnic

group may have different needs. Fathers of color must be considered in their diversity as well as their ethnic identity.

Finding Balance

We suggest that recognizing a balance between similarities and differences in fathers of different ethnic backgrounds is the hallmark of effective practice with and policy for fathers and their families. Generally, when ethnic fatherhood is discussed, conversations revolve around the differences that minority fathers at times exemplify from their mainstream counterparts. And though these differences are significant and crucial to understanding fathers in their appropriate contexts, there are equally important similarities between fathers regardless of their ethnic background. In fact, these similarities seem to dominate over differences. Men from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds often share common understandings of what fatherhood means to them. Some examples include: fathers' adoration and love for their children, their aspirations for their children's success, and their desires to teach and nurture their children. Similarities also include a father's focus on the financial well-being and emotional needs of his partner and children.²⁰

Observed similarities in fathers from differing ethnic backgrounds may arise from similar experiences. Adaptations to similar experiences, for example, may translate into greater similarities between recent immigrant fathers from Mexico and Croatia, than 1st and 3rd generation Mexican American fathers from the same town. Experiences related to immigration, work, language difficulties, discrimination, and shared socio-economic situations can manifest in the ways fathers interact with their children. Furthermore, the similarities resulting from shared experiences in fathers' lives at times contrast with differences caused by unique situations and backgrounds.

On the other hand, differences in parenting may be rooted in culture. What may be considered involved fathering by one culture may not be viewed similarly across or even within ethnic boundaries. In other words, what passes for involvement in one cultural context may not constitute involvement in another culture. For example, one culture might hold that reading to a child is an indicator of involved fatherhood, whereas in another culture reading may be replaced by storytelling or playing basketball. In this case, in spite of shared context, a father's culture and values may still play out as important factors in determining his parenting style. For instance, Puerto Rican and African American fathers in New York at times may share various fathering characteristics (e.g., types of interactions and actual time with children) which may be related to shared family structures and socioeconomic situations. Yet these men may father in quite different ways because of their values (e.g., *marianismo*, *respeto*), their roots (e.g., immigration history), and their culture (e.g., games they play with the children, quinceñeras, religious beliefs).²¹ The key point is that differences apparent to others need to be balanced with greater understanding of the commonalities among fathers regardless of their ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

A Strengths-Based View of Ethnic Minority Fathers

In this section, pulling from our experience with African American and Latino fathers, we explore some of the personal strengths that are common among many ethnic minority fathers. Ethnic minority fathers are often viewed through a lens of deficiency, and yet they exhibit many strengths. There is great resiliency among ethnic minority fathers and the contributions they make to families, communities, and future generations should be acknowledged and appreciated.

Personal Strengths of African American Fathers

Much of the current scholarship on fatherhood among ethnic minority groups has come from the study of African American fathers. Several writers, including Robert Staples (writing about African American men)²² and the late John McAdoo (writing specifically about black fathers),²³ were pioneers in expanding our understanding of the roles that African American males play in black family life across the lifespan. Some of the specific strengths that tend to be seen among African American fathers include high levels of physical and emotional involvement.

Physical involvement with their children is one of the strengths that African American men seem to bring to their fathering efforts. A recent study of ethnically diverse fathers countered the generally negative portrayal of African American fathers, showing that African American fathers provided more physical care for their children than Asian American, European American, and Latino fathers.²⁴ In other words African American fathers more commonly reported that they bathed their children, changed diapers, disciplined their children, made appointments, and took them to activities. Many of these fathers know what it is like to be raised without an involved father, and have taken it upon themselves to be the involved father they want for their children.

However, such direct involvement and physical involvement is more difficult for fathers in limited income or non-residential situations. For example, supporting the work of early pioneers who studied the family lives of African Americans, researchers have found African American fathers were more likely to be physically involved fathers when they had higher income and education levels.²⁵ Also, researchers have also established that involved fathers are typically married longer, have better communication skills, and enjoy more support from outside

their primary relationships. Such findings suggest the value of a supportive context for involvement for African American fathers, which benefits both them and their children.

Allen and Connor theorized that there were ethnic differences in the way that African American fathers approached their paternal work in families.²⁶ They described an “afrocentric” conceptualization of generative fathering that included economic support, workplace challenges, transmission of cultural values, and bicultural socialization. Identifying the concepts that give meaning and motivation to father involvement for ethnic minority fathers can be helpful in using cultural values to sustain and renew healthy family relationships.

In addition to physical care, emotional involvement and feelings of paternal responsibility are also important to African American fathers. Ahmeduzzaman and Roopnarine have shown that African American fathers are generally quite emotionally involved, and take responsibility for their children.²⁷ Researchers have also pointed out that although relationship and economic obstacles prevent some African American fathers from living with or spending time with their children, these deprivations often lead to heightened feelings of responsibility towards the children.²⁸ Continuing research needs to be done to examine the many ways African American fathers are involved and valued by their children.

Personal Strengths of Latino Fathers

Most Latino fathers express a number of personal and family-related strengths that set them apart as real family men. Various authors have expressed new typologies of generative Latino fatherhood such as the loving husband, the consumed father, and the family man.²⁹ This non-deficit or resilience perspective is becoming a new way to approach Latino men in research, the media, and other venues. Some of the specific strengths that are typically expressed among Latino fathers include emotional involvement, family involvement, and physical involvement.

Research has demonstrated that Latino fathers are generally affectionate and emotionally involved in their children's lives.³⁰ In fact, in some domains Latinos have been shown to do better than fathers of other ethnicities. For example, one study found Latino dads were more engaged, warmer, and less controlling than African American, Asian American, and European American fathers, and more responsible for their children's needs than Asian American and European American fathers.³¹ Other research studies have found that Latino fathers are often more nurturing, concerned, and emotionally supportive when compared with their European American counterparts.³² Such findings confirm the caring and competent attitudes that many Latino fathers bring to family life.

Many Latino fathers are known for the emphasis they put on cooperation, family unity, and child rearing—or, in other words, *familismo*.³³ *Familismo* is a term that refers to Latinos' cultural emphasis on family cohesiveness, interdependence, loyalty, and responsibility to care for one another.³⁴ To many Latinos, *familismo* means placing the family before one's personal needs and assuring that all family members are emotionally supported.³⁵ In fact, some have asserted that *familismo* is the most constant and fundamental dimension of Latino family life.³⁶ Latino fathers are expected to bring the family together, and once it is together, the fathers are expected to limit the potential disarray that could be expected when multiple generations and many children get together.

Machismo is a different term that is often used to emphasize Latino men's role as head of household in place of their roles as father and husband. It has generally been defined with negative connotations, such as "exaggerated masculinity, physical prowess, and male chauvinism."³⁷ Others have come to think of machismo in a more positive light, defining it with terms like "true bravery or valor, courage, generosity, stoicism, heroism, and ferocity."³⁸ Latino

fathers may at times equate machismo with feeling masculine, while feeling conflicting pressure in the U.S to be more nurturing and family-oriented.³⁹ These conflicting cultural expectations and values may lead to increased ambiguity over the appropriate role of fathers in families and how they should interact with their children.

Latino fathers are also known for their being physically present in the lives of their children. For example, various researchers have found that Latino fathers are more physically involved, monitor their children more, and provide more consistent discipline than their European American counterparts.⁴⁰ Other researchers have described Latino dads as engaging in contemporary fathering roles such as: playmate, participant, and emotional supporter.⁴¹ Francisco, a Latino father of three, exemplifies this idea. He wakes up for work early in the morning and is there to pick up his kids up from school and daycare in the afternoon. He then spends most of his time in the afternoons and evenings doing things with his kids. He models the reality that Latino fathers are often nurturing, concerned, and physically involved in the lives of their children.

Common Barriers Experienced by Ethnic Minority Fathers

As discussed previously, ethnic minority fathers oftentimes struggle against barriers that inhibit their involvement or diminish their influence in their children's lives. Typically, barriers are obstacles in fathers' environments or lives which limit involvement and may be beyond their control. The barriers discussed here include non-marital births and non-residential fatherhood, difficulty in providing for the family, lack of English language abilities, and discrimination. By understanding these barriers, it is possible to work toward reducing them and assisting fathers to overcome them.

Non-Marital Births and Non-Residential Fatherhood

One barrier commonly faced by Latino and African American men in family life is the high rate of non-marital births and the implications for fatherhood in these ethnic populations. In 1994, 38 percent of Latino and 74 percent of African American births occurred out of wedlock.⁴² While residential fatherhood is preferable in situations of non-marital births, in some cases couples split up, because of financial reasons, relationship difficulties, or multiple or extended household responsibilities.⁴³ This type of fatherhood—called nonresident fatherhood—is prevalent among some ethnic minority groups. For example, in 2003, 30 percent of Latino children and 59 percent of African American children lived in households without their fathers.⁴⁴ Due to concern for children in poverty and children with nonresident fathers, various studies have exclusively focused on fathers in these circumstances.⁴⁵ They have found that many nonresidential fathers make significant efforts to be involved in their children's lives, and many of them are successful. Although such circumstances are not desirable for fathers and children, it should be acknowledged that healthy father-child relationships can still exist under such conditions.

The key structural barrier in these circumstances is that fathers often do not actually live with their children and the distance or separation from their children becomes a distinct challenge. Some studies have showed, however, that nonresident (especially ethnic minority) dads are more involved than characteristically believed.⁴⁶ Contrasting with traditional views of non-residential fatherhood, large-scale studies have shown that many nonresident fathers are very involved, and that greater involvement on the part of fathers is related to positive child outcomes.⁴⁷ For instance, Dunn and colleagues have shown that child adjustment is consistently related to the quality of the father-child relationship.⁴⁸ Thus, it appears that even for non-

residential fathers encouraging father involvement benefits children. These and other studies suggest that at least some ethnic minority fathers overcome the barriers common to non-resident father status, and are able to be involved and make a difference in the lives of their children. A quote from a never-married, non-custodial African American father named Devon shares this sentiment: “Some would look down on me because I don’t live with my kid, but I see my son nearly every night. He comes over to my mother’s house and we play basketball or whatever.”⁴⁹

Challenges with the Provider Role

Another common barrier that hinders some African American and Latino fathers is the challenge associated with fulfilling the “provider” role as parents. Given the relatively high rates of unemployment in both African American (9 percent unemployed) and Latino (7 percent unemployed) populations, we should expect that unemployed fathers’ ability to be successfully involved fathers would be diminished. Being able to fulfill their obligations to financially provide for their children is a powerful expectation for most men. When fathers cannot contribute fully to the financial and material well-being of their families, they can become demoralized and isolated from family life. Fathers may become estranged from their family relationships through processes such as partner conflict, separation or divorce, long hours at work, or physical distance from their children.⁵⁰

Unemployment and under-employment are serious barriers to success in the provider role for fathers of color.⁵¹ Non-residential fathers often have difficulty in providing adequately for their children because of employment problems. Rather than “deadbeat dads” these fathers are more often “dead broke dads,” or fathers who do not have the financial means to allow them free entry into their child’s lives.⁵² Socio-economic differences are often mistaken for ethnic differences in studies of ethnic minority fatherhood.⁵³ Countering accepted thinking, some

researchers have found that African American and Latino fathers with low incomes may in fact be more involved as caregivers than their non-poor counterparts.⁵⁴ This demonstrates resiliency in the face of economic and cultural pressures. A good example is furnished in a recent study of Latino immigrant fathers, which showed that fathers continued to be actively involved in their children's lives even as they struggled with acculturation, and fought to acquire work and a new language.⁵⁵ These immigrant fathers have more difficulty than their wives in finding and keeping work, which counters cultural expectations of the father as a provider. Studies like this indicate that some of the problems ethnic minorities face are rooted in economic disparity, yet other barriers are structural (e.g., institutional racism) or cultural (e.g., customs).

Some scholars suggest that existing welfare and child support legislation still tends to discourage father involvement (especially in relation to nonresident fathers) among ethnic minority fathers.⁵⁶ They also find that many "fragile families" are normatively still in romantic relationships at the time of the child's birth and could benefit from specific support. Thus, a rethinking of current public policy regarding fathers and families may be in order. Some of the remedies to this barrier that have been suggested include increased assistance funding for two-parent households (regardless of marital status) in poverty, the reduction of child support orders for cohabiting fathers, and reconsideration of child support enforcement procedures that take into account fathers' circumstances and income.⁵⁷

English Abilities

The acquisition of English language skills is a barrier faced particularly by immigrant ethnic fathers who have come to the United States. Latino fathers comprise the largest group of these immigrant fathers, and more than two-fifths of them do not speak English.⁵⁸ Language barriers isolate men from public resources such as public assistance and better employment, and

at times also from their children. During one of our studies with Latino fathers, Pedro stated that he cannot talk to his teenagers because his “kids live in a different world,” one where English and American culture prevail.⁵⁹ Limited English abilities make it difficult for these fathers to access this world and really communicate with their children. Language difficulties can also limit fathers’ abilities to be involved in their children’s schooling. For instance, Latino dads might want to help their children with homework, but be constrained by a lack of English fluency or the schoolwork being too advanced. In doing some work with Latino fathers, one father reported that he used to spend hours with his kids working on their homework, until one day they stopped asking for help because he was getting their answers wrong. Such barriers can discourage fathers in their involvement and thus deserve attention. Increased attention would help local communities and programs mobilize themselves to reduce such challenges and help fathers of color to be meaningfully involved.

Discrimination and Prejudice

The barriers that ethnic minority fathers may encounter in their efforts to be good parents can also include social forces such as ethnic bias (e.g., institutional racism) and class bias. Though these forms of prejudice and discrimination may not be seen as directly influencing the ways men father per se, these two forms of bias have been shown to contaminate family relationships, by adding stress and additional concerns that make life especially difficult for ethnic minority families.⁶⁰ Additionally, problems that flow indirectly from these barriers such as poverty, poor options for education, and the lack of employment opportunities, lead to further stresses. Researchers have shown that fathers struggling with racial prejudice and the accompanying economic hardships that go along with it are at particular risk for physical and emotional problems (i.e., depression).⁶¹

Core Elements of Positive Involvement for Ethnic Minority Fathers

Understanding the complexity of family experiences faced by ethnic minority fathers helps us to recognize the core elements that demonstrate how these fathers make a difference. What does good fathering mean to fathers of color and their families? This section will elaborate on four core elements of positive involvement that we have identified with minority fathers.

Multiple Pathways of Father Involvement

Fathers can be involved in many healthy ways. They can be emotionally, cognitively (e.g., thinking or worrying about their children), and physically involved.⁶² They may also be indirectly involved through such means as providing income or being supportive of the mother. For instance, as in our first example of Jorge and his teenage daughters, a father can be very involved in his children's lives but not spend huge amounts of time on a daily basis with them. However, these ethnic minority fathers have reported that to make this work they need to be focused on their child(ren) and/or need to find an emotional connection with them. Similarly, many non-residential fathers find ways to be very involved, even though it may prove more difficult for them at times. In fact, most of the children we have interviewed are proud of their dads, and though most of these children long for more time with their dads (as most kids do), they feel that their dads really care and do make a difference.

Emotionally Involved and Supportive Fathers

A second core element of positive involvement among fathers of color is their levels of emotional engagement, or their positive and lasting feelings for their children. Research and our experience has typically shown that African American and Latino fathers are emotionally involved in the lives of their children. A high level of emotional engagement, common among both African American and Latino fathers, benefits both the fathers and their children.⁶³ Though

at times these fathers may have fewer opportunities to be involved fathers, this emotional bond may help them to make up for these lost opportunities.⁶⁴ For instance, Devon (non-residential African American father) told us he made special efforts to be emotionally involved in his son's life even though he could not live with him. He said he loves to just talk and connect with his son while they play basketball, hang out on the porch, or go out to eat.⁶⁵ Such efforts to be emotionally engaged bode well for ethnic minority fathers and their children.

Willingness to Sacrifice for Children

A willingness to make sacrifices in providing for and supporting their children is a common attitude that many ethnic minority fathers bear. For example, Pablo, a Latino father of three kids who worked long, 10-hour days at a local meat packing plant noted:

See, I tell them, "You see how hard your mom and I work, so that ya'll are have what you need. We are making a sacrifice so that you can live well . . ." It's always been a sacrifice.⁶⁶

Pablo speaks for many ethnic minority fathers who see their willingness to sacrifice for the good of their children as a number one priority. This theme of sacrificing regularly for one's family is a theme that has come up time and time again in interviews we have conducted with fathers of color. These sacrifices may bring fathers closer to their children, particularly as both fathers and their children achieve a deeper realization of why the sacrifices are being made. A low-income African American father who was interviewed, for example, reported that he often uses up most of his paycheck to take over nice things to his daughter and take her out when he's given a chance to visit. The loss of most of his paycheck is a sacrifice, yet he finds it worthwhile because he knows they both really enjoy these special times together. Sacrificing regularly for children is a strength championed by fathers of color who often have a heritage borne of hardship and sacrifice.

Traversing Multiple Meanings of Fatherhood

To be successful in their role as fathers, many ethnic minority fathers must manage conflicting notions of their fathering role. For example, fathers from Mexico may immigrate with one set of expectations about their roles as fathers, and be confronted with new expectations for fathering after arriving in the United States. One father, Ruben said, “The culture is different. Over there [meaning Mexico], the men are more machismos, they don’t spend their time with the family, they spend more time with their friends. Here, it’s more family-oriented and about family unity.” Thus, immigrant fathers and other fathers of color must learn to balance the conflicting expectations of two cultures and parent the way they feel is best for their children. Similarly, African American fathers often must battle various negative stereotypes and balance differing expectations in their attempts to be nurturing and involved fathers.⁶⁷ Fathers who find they are able to negotiate a comfortable place for themselves between two contrasting sets of expectations appear to do better in the long run and seem to be able to provide more consistent discipline and nurturance to their children.

Conclusion

Understanding that ethnic minorities are expected to account for over 50 percent of the U.S. population by 2050,⁶⁸ it is imperative that we learn to appreciate how ethnic minority fathers matter to their children and families. Research shows that effective father involvement promotes healthy childhood development, regardless of ethnic background.⁶⁹ In this chapter, we have explored important structural and individual barriers that make involved fathering difficult for some ethnic minority fathers, and we recognize that these differences are significant and crucial to understanding fathers in their appropriate contexts. More importantly, however, we have identified important similarities (i.e., emotional and physical involvement) between fathers

of various ethnic backgrounds. These similarities are often in the form of strengths that fathers bring to parenting their children.

Greater focus on fathers' strengths by the media and the general public is one of the key factors that is needed to overcome the challenges that many of these fathers face. By supporting and encouraging these ethnic minority men in their role as fathers, the positive impact these fathers have in the lives of their children will only continue to grow. We suggest that fathers in all circumstances, including fathers of color, need value their own potential importance to a child's well-being and take steps to strengthen their contributions and commitment to their children's lives.

Sidebar Article #1

Steps Toward Positive Contributions for Ethnic Minority Fathers

Ethnic minority dads should:

- Believe in their ability to be a positive role model in their children's lives.
- Decide on how involved they wish to be in their children's lives and commit themselves to doing what they hope to do.
- Be strong and counteract negative stereotypes by being the type of father they think their children need.
- Work with their child's mother to create rules and come to a common ground regarding the parenting of their children. Remember that raising a child takes teamwork.
- Keep a positive outlook even though economic and other factors may get in the way of being actively involved in children's lives.
- Strive to find creative ways to be involved and make consistent efforts to overcome barriers (e.g., validate and repair hurt feelings, look for job opportunities).

Community professionals, programs and organizations should:

- Actively seek out ethnic minority fathers as clientele and participants.
- Be aware of the strengths these fathers possess and the barriers these fathers face.
- Create coalitions with local organizations to better serve ethnic minority fathers.
- Advocate for ethnic minority men and encourage their involvement as fathers.
- Play more visible roles within ethnically diverse communities and work to overcome the hesitancy some families have about receiving parenting help.
- Be sensitive in understanding and supporting the unique perspectives that ethnic minority fathers may hold.

- Help fathers negotiate conflicting pressures and expectations that may interfere with their paternal role.
- Provide social supports via informal mentoring, informal support groups, and so on.

Public policymakers should:

- Support funding of fatherhood programs that target a diverse array of fathers from various ethnic backgrounds.
- Consider funding informal support groups for ethnic minority fathers (e.g., via religious congregations, sport leagues, and other clubs and associations).
- Create further opportunities for immigrant parents to learn English and other skills they may need.
- Increase funding for two-parent households (regardless of marital status) in poverty.
- Reduce or modify child support orders for cohabiting fathers.
- Reconsider child support enforcement procedures so that they take into account fathers' circumstances and income.⁷⁰

Endnotes - Chapter 15

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