

## **Noncustodial Fathers Who Pay Supplemental Support for Their Children After Divorce**

This study examined the relationship between supplemental financial support provided by noncustodial fathers and amount of contact with children; level of involvement; frequency of discussions and frequency of conflict with former spouse; level of financial satisfaction; percentage of children's expenses they think child support covers; and extent to which they feel former spouse is paying her share of children's expenses. Multiple regression analysis revealed that involvement with children was the only variable related to supplementary financial support.

**Jean M. Lown, Utah State University<sup>1</sup>**  
**Susan W. Chandler, Utah State University<sup>2</sup>**

### **Introduction**

Fully one-third of the \$17.7 billion in child support due in 1991 was not paid (U.S. Census Bureau, 1997). Divorced men who fail to pay child support have received media and legislative attention, yet little is known about the nature and extent of their supplemental financial contributions to their children. Almost all studies on the economics of divorce and child support have relied on data collected from custodial mothers (Seltzer, Schaeffer, & Charng, 1989; Scoon-Rogers & Lester, 1995; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991).

In an era when noncustodial fathers are commonly associated with the label "deadbeat dads," this study focuses on the prospects for encouraging fathers who meet their child support obligation to contribute additional financial resources to compensate for inadequate support awards. While child support enforcement laws are necessary, this study explores ways to encourage more voluntary support from responsible noncustodial fathers.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship of the amount of supplemental financial support provided by noncustodial fathers and (a) their contact with their children; (b) their involvement with their children; (c) coparental interaction with their former spouse about decisions concerning their children; (d) conflict with their former spouse; (e) satisfaction with their finances, (f) percentage of children's expenses they think child support covers; and (g) extent to which their former spouse is paying her fair share of children's expenses.

### **Review of Literature**

A paucity of literature addresses the supplementary financial contributions of noncustodial fathers to their children. Studies identified categories of supplemental financial and in-kind assistance that nonresident fathers provided and some of the factors that encouraged fathers to provide financial or in-kind assistance, such as contact with the children through visitation and continued parental involvement (Pearson and Thoennes, 1988; Haskins, 1988; Teachman, 1991).

Haskins' (1988) study of low-income Black fathers in North Carolina provides the only data on supplementary support from minority noncustodial fathers. The kinds of assistance included cash gifts, paying bills, and providing the mother or children with clothing or other gifts. Using data from custodial mothers in the National Longitudinal Study of the High School Class of 1972, Teachman (1991) concluded that, other than paying child support and buying gifts, the majority of fathers never made contributions of supplemental financial assistance to their children. Lown (1994) reported that 94.2% of a sample of noncustodial fathers reported that in addition to child support they paid for clothing, toys and gifts.

Pearson and Thoennes (1988) concluded that one of the most critical variables predicting the provision of supplemental financial support and in-kind contributions was the amount of contact noncustodial fathers had with their children. Teachman (1991) also found a positive correlation between the amount of visitation and supplemental financial

support. How frequently fathers visited their children was intertwined with their feelings about the visits. The more dissatisfied fathers were with the length and frequency of their visits, the less they actually saw their children (Arditti, 1992).

In addition to the amount of contact noncustodial fathers had with their children, fathers' involvement in the daily activities of their children's lives such as helping with homework; transporting children to friends; and attending school events increased the amounts of supplemental financial support noncustodial fathers provided (Pearson & Thoennes, 1988; Teachman, 1991).

Arditti and Kelly (1994) found that a more friendly and supportive coparental relationship between former spouses resulted in increased discussions about child rearing. Coparental interaction appears to have an important role in determining visitation patterns and noncustodial fathers' satisfaction with custody arrangements (Ahrns, 1983; Ahrns & Miller, 1993; Arditti & Kelly, 1994; Seltzer, 1991). Fathers with cooperative interactions with former spouses were more satisfied with custody arrangements and property settlement (Arditti and Kelly, 1994).

The co-parental relationship is important in predicting whether assistance is provided; fathers who enjoyed a friendlier relationship with their former spouse, who have visitation rights, and who have joint custody provide more financial contributions (Teachman, 1991). Conflict with the former spouse reduces the amount of time fathers spend with their children as well as the number of visits (Ahrns, 1983; Ahrns & Miller, 1993; Seltzer, 1991; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Noncustodial fathers identified finances as their most troublesome problem following divorce (Coney & Mackey, 1989). In spite of research indicating that divorced fathers are better off financially than their former spouses and that their financial situation usually improves after divorce (Fletcher, 1989; Rowe & Lown, 1990), noncustodial fathers perceive themselves as worse off financially.

Child support comprised 17 percent of total money income received by custodial mothers receiving child support in 1991 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997). Child support payments were 34% of the total money income of poor mothers compared with 15 % of non-poor mothers. The average child support amount received by custodial mothers receiving full or partial payments in 1991 was \$3,011; the mean child support payment received by poor women was \$1922.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study combines Ahrns' binuclear family model with social exchange theory (Homans, 1974). Ahrns (1983) developed the concept of the binuclear family as a more complicated family system rather than one that dissolves upon divorce. Social exchange theory asserts that people calculate costs and benefits in social transactions and will consider their perceptions of available alternatives when assessing costs and benefits. Exchanges that payoff influence patterns of social interactions. Exchange relationships reflect underlying patterns of social organization and thus create and reinforce normative structures of society Sabatelli & Shehan (1993).

### **Hypothesis**

The hypothesis tested in this study is that noncustodial fathers who are involved with their children; able to interact with their former spouses without high levels of conflict; and satisfied with their finances will provide more supplemental financial support, in addition to court-mandated child support, to their children.

### **Methods**

#### **Sample**

The sample consisted of 236 mostly Caucasian noncustodial fathers ranging from 22 to 61 years old. All had been divorced only once, and had between one and seven dependent children, ranging in age from under five years old to 18 years or older. Seventeen percent of the sample reported having only one child, 29% had two children, 18% had three children, 22% had four children, 6% had five children, 3% had six children, one father reported seven children.

Most of the sample reported some college education. Median income for 1993 was \$30,000 - \$39,999. All of the fathers in the sample were required to pay child support; the mean amount was \$521/month in total. Ninety-two percent of the fathers reported that they had always paid child support during the previous year.

### Procedure

In 1994, surveys were sent to a random sample of 500 noncustodial fathers, divorced during 1992, drawn from vital statistics records of a western state. The survey instrument and data collection followed a modified version of the Dillman (1978) Total Design Method.

Multiple linear regression analysis was used to assess the relationship between the amount of supplemental financial support (the dependent variable) and the independent variables amount of contact with the children, involvement with children, coparental interaction, conflict with the former spouse, satisfaction with finances, the noncustodial father's perception of the percentage of the children's expenses that are covered by child support, and the noncustodial father's perception of the extent to which the former spouse is paying her fair share of the children's expenses. A probability level of .05 was selected for statistical significance.

### Variables and Data Transformation

Dependent Variable. The dependent variable, the annual amount of supplemental financial support paid by noncustodial fathers for expenses of their children, is measured for six categories of expenses. These include health and/or dental insurance or uninsured expenses; education expenses (school fees, private school tuition); children's entertainment; children's food; clothing; and toys, and gifts for the children.

Respondents were asked whether or not they paid for each of the four categories of expenses making up the variable "supplemental financial support" during the previous year. The categories representing the dollar ranges for each of the expenses were assigned a dollar value representing the midpoint of the dollar range. Responses of 1 (less than \$100) were assigned a value of \$50; 2 (\$100 to \$299) a value of \$150; 3 (\$300 to \$599) a value of \$450; 4 (\$600 to \$899) a value of \$750; and 5 (\$900 or more) a value of \$950. Using this transformation resulted in the dependent variable, supplemental financial support, having a possible range of \$0 to \$3800.

Independent Variables. Contact with children is an estimate made by the noncustodial father of a) the average number of times he talked to his children on the phone, b) the average number of times he saw his children, and c) approximately how many nights the children stayed overnight with him during the previous year. To arrive at the average number of times the noncustodial father talked to his children on the phone and saw his children in the past year, each category was assigned a numerical value as follows: never = 0; less than once a month = 6; once a month = 12; twice a month = 24; once a week or more = 52. The transformation resulted in a range of zero to fifty-two for the number of times the noncustodial father talked on the phone with the children in the past year and a range of zero to fifty-two for the number of times he saw his children in the past year.

To determine how many nights during the past year the children stayed overnight, fathers responded (1) none; (2) one to ten; (3) eleven to twenty; (4) twenty-one to thirty; (5) thirty-one to forty; and (6) more than forty. Fathers responses were assigned a numerical value representing the midpoint value of the category; the category "more than 40" was assigned the value 45.

The variables involvement with children, coparental interaction, conflict with former spouse, and satisfaction with economic well-being are additive indexes measured as 5-point Likert scales. In each case, the variable is assigned a score representing the mean of the additive value of the responses to the questions in the scale. Each scale has a possible range of scores from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much).

Involvement with children is a fourteen-item 5-point Likert scale developed by Ahrons and Wallisch (1987) to measure how involved noncustodial fathers are with their children on a day-to-day basis. Coparental interaction is scored as the mean of the additive total of the 5-point Likert coparental interaction scale. The scale has a possible range of 1 (never) to 5 (always). The scale (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987) consists of ten questions father about the frequency of discussions with his former spouse of topics such as day-to-day decisions and major decisions regarding the children's lives. The conflict scale (Ahrons & Wallisch, 1987) consists of four questions in a five-point Likert scale regarding how often a noncustodial father's interactions with his former spouse result in conflict. Satisfaction with economic well-being is also measured as a 5-point Likert scale. The original scale (Berger, Powell, & Cook, 1988) consisted of six questions concerning satisfaction with finances. A seventh item, satisfaction with their overall financial situation, was added.

### **Results**

The hypothesis tested in this study was that noncustodial fathers who are involved with their children; interact with their former spouses without a lot of conflict; and who are satisfied with their finances will provide more supplemental financial support to their children.

Table 1  
Intercorrelations and Coefficient Alpha Reliability Estimates

Variable	Intercorrelations						
	Y	X <sub>1</sub>	X <sub>2</sub>	X <sub>3</sub>	X <sub>4</sub>	X <sub>5</sub>	X <sub>6</sub> X <sub>7</sub>
Y Supplemental support							
X <sub>1</sub> Contact children	.34***						
X <sub>2</sub> Involvement with children	.37***	.58***	(.95)				
X <sub>3</sub> Conflict former spouse	.00	-.10	-.07	(.89)			
X <sub>4</sub> Coparental interaction	.23***	.45***	.53***	-.45***	(.95)		
X <sub>5</sub> Financial satisfaction	.14*	.21**	.22**	-.11	.15*	(.91)	
X <sub>6</sub> Expenses child support pays	.18**	.02	.07	.10	-.02	.23***	
X <sub>7</sub> Mother's share of expenses	-.04	.01	-.01	-.30***	.30***	-.10	-.30***

Note. N = 236. Reliability estimates appear in parentheses on the diagonal.  
\*p < .05, two-tailed. \*\*p < .01, two-tailed. \*\*\*p < .001, two-tailed.

Table 2  
Means and Standard Deviations

Variable	M	SD
Y Supplemental Support	2101.32	1192.65
X <sub>1</sub> Contact with children	101.88	40.13
X <sub>2</sub> Involvement with children	3.07	0.98
X <sub>3</sub> Conflict with former spouse	3.16	1.05
X <sub>4</sub> Coparental interaction	2.53	1.02
X <sub>5</sub> Financial satisfaction	2.60	0.91
X <sub>6</sub> Expenses child support pays	74.35	25.25
X <sub>7</sub> Mother's share of expenses	0.44	0.50

Note. N = 236.

Consistent with Peterson and Nord (1990) and Teachman (1991), only involvement with children was statistically significant in predicting the amount of supplementary financial support provided by noncustodial fathers, most of whom were paying child support as mandated. Using OLS regression (enter method) only contact (.0479) and involvement (.0072) were significant.

Table 3

Summary of Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Supplemental Support (n = 173)

<b>Variable</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>SE B</b>	<b>β</b>
X <sub>1</sub> Contact with children	4.44	2.98	.14
X <sub>2</sub> Involvement with children	325.27	124.41	.26*
X <sub>3</sub> Conflict with former spouse	31.99	97.34	.03
X <sub>4</sub> Coparental Interaction	41.78	125.43	.04
X <sub>5</sub> Financial satisfaction	36.75	97.08	.03
X <sub>6</sub> Expenses paid by child support	1.81	3.70	.04
X <sub>7</sub> Mother's share of expenses	-39.35	201.00	-.02
(Constant)	340.30	609.05	

Note.  $R^2 = .16$ ; Adjusted  $R^2 = .12$  \* $p < .01$ , two-tailed.

$F = 4.33$  (7, 165).  $p < .0002$

Next, the variables were entered in a stepwise multiple regression which yielded a Beta of 460.33 ( $B = 460.33$ ,  $SE B = 88.52$ ,  $T = 5.20$ ,  $Sig T = .000$ ). Multiple  $R = .37$  and  $R$  squared = .137 indicating that involvement with children accounted for 13.7% of the variance in the supplemental support variable.

### Discussion

There are obvious limitations to this research. The convenience sample is not representative of noncustodial fathers but does represent a group that is more responsible and willing and able to provide additional support. The study was limited to previously married fathers and thus excluded the growing number of never married fathers who split from their child's mother. By studying those noncustodial fathers who have the potential to make substantial financial contributions above and beyond child support this study provides confirmation the the involvement with their children is a critical factor.

Results are consistent with previous studies that indicated that contact with children was the most significant in paying court-mandated child support and for supplementary cash and in-kind support. Thus practitioners who work with families contemplating divorce, in process and shortly after the divorce decree should emphasize the importance of continued involvement of the non-custodial parent. This recommendation assumes the absence of contrary indicators such as physical or sexual abuse, or substance abuse. While joint legal custody is the norm after divorce, most children continue to spend most of their time with the custodial mother. The financial well-being of the children can be enhanced when noncustodial fathers, who typically have greater financial resources, are encouraged to become more involved with their children after parental divorce.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings from this study are important because we know so little about noncustodial fathers and there is a need to increase financial support for children of divorce. Previous research indicates that financial support is linked to contact with children.

In many respects the respondents were not representative of the population of noncustodial fathers. Since data were collected via a ten-page mailed survey, subjects whose primary language is not English and who were less educated were less likely to respond. Many did not receive the survey because they had moved repeatedly since the divorce or had no permanent address. Further, noncustodial fathers whose child support payments were in arrears were be less likely to respond. While national data sets can provide representative data, they fail to contain the wealth of information available from detailed surveys. The philosophy behind the Noncustodial Fathers Project is that there is much to be learned from responsible noncustodial fathers, a neglected group.

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## Endnotes

1. Professor, Department of Human Environments
2. Graduate Student, Department of Human Environments