

Fathering in Northern New England: Levels of Father Involvement in Maine and New Hampshire

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ABSTRACT. This study examined father involvement among non-custodial fathers from divorced families in Maine and New Hampshire. Measures of involvement included days and nights of contact, attendance at children's events, participation in decision-making, and celebration of major holidays with children. Results were commensurate with other studies and highlighted the importance of parental conflict and geographic distance in determining father-child contact. The author makes several recommendations for policy-makers and practitioners. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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Researchers have been studying divorced families for several decades. Most of the published research on divorced families has been targeted at a national audience (Nord & Zill, 1996) to address, for

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example, trends in father-child contact, child well-being, or child support payment compliance. While it is important for scholars, practitioners and decision-makers to have a comprehensive understanding of the “state of divorced families” nationwide, with some minor exceptions (Roggman, Boyce, Cook, & Cook, 2002) most of our policies and programs for divorced families are targeted at the regional, state and local level. For example, a search for “fathering programs” on the website of the National Center for Fathers and Families (<http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu>) returns 10 national programs and 306 regional programs. Policies such as parenting plans, presumptions for joint custody, mandated mediation and divorce education programs are directed and enforced at the state-level, while father involvement programs are targeted at the county or city level.

Most studies show that demographic factors are important predictors in determining a divorced family’s level of functioning (Arditti, 1992; Candian & Meyer, 1998; Maccoby & Mnookin, 1992). Because demographic factors such as race, income and education levels differ by region, the characteristics and levels of functioning of divorced families are likely to differ as well (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Families with different characteristics need programs and policies with different strengths; however, without specific information about regional family characteristics, it can be impossible for decision-makers to design and implement policies and programs that match the needs of the families in a given population.

The purpose of this paper is to provide this type of needed information about divorced families, specifically father involvement, in northern New England. First, the author will discuss the history of father involvement initiatives in Maine and New Hampshire, followed by a brief outline of the literature on divorced families and finally, the goals and research questions of the current study.

MAINE AND NEW HAMPSHIRE

The legislatures within the states of Maine and New Hampshire have displayed significant interest in the topic of divorced families for several decades. New Hampshire was among the first states in the union to implement a presumption for joint legal custody in 1981 (Title XLIII, Domestic Relations, N.H. Rev. Stat. Ann. §458:17, II), followed by an exemption for this custodial arrangement for families of violence in 1989 (Title XLIII, Domestic Relations, N.H. Rev. Stat. Ann. §458:17,

II-c). It also has a mandated divorce education program for all divorcing parents (Title XLIII, Domestic Relations, N.H. rev. Stat. Ann. §458D:2). Maine has a statute mandating mediation for couples that are unable to resolve their divorce and in 2001 (Title 19-A, Domestic Relations, Me. Rev. Stat. Ann. §251), passed a law stating the if a parent makes a request for joint custody and it has been denied, the reason for rejection must be stated in writing by the court (Title 19-A, Domestic Relations, Me. Rev. Stat. Ann. §1653-2D). More recently, in 2002, Maine created a legislative commission to study the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children (Me. Resolve 2001, Chapter 121).

There is evidence that Maine and New Hampshire fathers have had an interest in increasing their level of involvement with their children. New Hampshire has had active fathers' rights groups, including Fathers United for Equal Justice and the National Coalition of Fathers and Children. In 2000-2001, there was a legislative commission to study the status of men, part of which was dedicated to addressing issues of father involvement (New Hampshire on the Commission to Study the Status of Men, 2001). Maine has also had fathers' rights advocacy groups including Coalition Organized for Parental Equality and Maine Dads (Douglas, 2002).

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

National statistics indicate that noncustodial, divorced fathers are not very involved in the lives of their children. Stephen, Freedman and Hess (1993) used data from the 1987-1988 National Survey of Families and Households to assess the amount of contact children have with their noncustodial parents. Their sample consisted of 943 mothers who had been separated from their spouses for at least 12 months. According to the mothers in the sample, within the past year, 22.7% of fathers saw their children at least once a week; 18.6% of children saw their father a few times a month; and 29.3% of the children did not see their fathers at all. The results further indicated that 75.4% of the children did not spend as much as one week with their father in the previous year. However, this figure may not be entirely accurate. Often, children of divorce spend part of a week with each parent, (even if only for one night with the noncustodial parent). Therefore, children may not spend a complete week with either parent during any time of the year. The wording of this question may have led respondents to answer the question inaccurately.

Seltzer (1991) also used this dataset to research father involvement of divorced fathers and found similar results.

Seltzer and Bianchi (1988) considered parent-child contact patterns among noncustodial parents using data from the 1981 National Health Interview Survey and Child Health Supplement, conducted by the Census Bureau. The sample size for this study included 15,416 children. Of children who lived with their biological mother, 35.2% never see their father, 10.2% see their father 1-3 times a month and 14.5% see their father at least once a week.

Seltzer, Schaeffer and Charng (1989) investigated family relationships after divorce using the 1985 Wisconsin Children, Incomes, and Program Participation dataset, where all of the custodial parents in the sample were mothers. Using a sample of 180, they found that mothers reported that 23% of the children had not seen their fathers in the past twelve months; 27% saw their fathers once or twice a month; and 32% saw their fathers once a week or more. Also conducted during a similar time frame, Ahrons and Miller (1993) completed a longitudinal study on divorced families and found more optimistic results. They followed 128 divorced parents (64 couples) for the five-year period immediately following their divorces between 1979-1984 and found that, on average, children stayed with their fathers two or three nights per month. Paternal involvement remained fairly constant over this period, with fathers responding that they were "somewhat" involved in the parenting of their children.

Koch and Lowery (1985) also found more frequent contact between fathers and children in their small sample of 30 fathers who, on average, had been divorced for eight months. They found that half of fathers reported a pattern of weekly contact, 20% bimonthly contact, 10% monthly contact and 20% reported seeing their children less than monthly. It should be noted, however, that more frequent contact during the first two years of separation or divorce is a common phenomenon and does not necessarily predict high levels of contact for the future (Seltzer, 1991).

In the largest national study to date, Nord and Zill (1996) assessed the amount of contact that children have with their noncustodial fathers. Using data that was collected in 1990 and with a sample size of 5,777,726 families, they determined that 33.9% of children do not have contact with their fathers. Of children who do see their fathers, 22.8% saw their fathers once a month or less, 11.2% saw their fathers "one to two" times a month, 12.8% saw their fathers "two to four" times a month and 19.3% saw their fathers once a week or more. A more recent

study from the National Center for Education Statistics (1997) with a sample size of 5,400 noncustodial fathers, found that 25% did not see their school-aged children in the past year. This study also found that of fathers who had child contact, 22% had attended at least one school event in the past year. Family income, level of education, and mother's marital status were positively associated with father involvement in children's activities.

In sum, most studies indicate that divorced fathers do not have frequent contact with their children. Roughly 20 to 30% of children see their fathers at least once a week, approximately 30% of children see their fathers infrequently enough that it is counted on a monthly basis and another 30% children do not have contact with their fathers at all.

CURRENT STUDY

The present study addresses what many other scholars have studied thus far—contact between fathers and their children. However, this paper provides a special focus on the northern New England states of Maine and New Hampshire, a region that has been unexplored with regard to divorced families. There are several other unique aspects of this study. First, data was collected from fathers instead of from mothers. While there is always an element of risk in asking subjects to report about their own behavior, this technique is no less risky than asking mothers to report about the behavior of their ex-husbands—a technique that many researchers have used (Nord & Zill, 1996; Seltzer, 1991; Seltzer & Bianchi, 1988; Seltzer et al., 1989; Stephen et al., 1993).

Second, fathers were asked to report about the contact that they have with their children using a four-week calendar. In previous studies, families have often been asked to select how often children have contact with their fathers using questions such as, “several times a month,” or “at least once a week.” Questions such as this do not accurately capture the complexities of divorced families, such as a schedule where a child lives with the father for the summer and the mother for the school year, or a schedule where a child rotates between households every two weeks or the “two-two-split” schedule where a child spends two weekdays with each parent and then alternates weekends between homes. Thus, the data collection technique that was used in this study to assess contact was intended to capture a more accurate picture of contact between fathers and their children. Third, the author included measures of

contact between fathers and children for both days and *nights*, something that is often over-looked in the literature on divorced families.

The research questions investigated in this study were:

1. What is the level of involvement that divorced, noncustodial fathers in northern New England have with their children on the following factors?
 - a. Days and nights of contact per month
 - b. Celebrating a major holiday with the child
 - c. Attendance at school events and extracurricular activities
 - d. Participation in decision-making about child's life
2. What demographic and personal factors are related to father involvement?

METHOD

This study was conducted through the use of a mail survey that was administered in October, 2000-January, 2001 to Maine and New Hampshire fathers who were divorced between 1996 and 1998.

Procedure

The sample for this study was drawn from court records in 6 counties within the states of Maine and New Hampshire (3 counties from each state). Fathers were selected for participation if: (1) their divorce was initiated and finalized between 1996 and 1998, (2) they lived within the United States at the time of their divorce, and (3) as of 2001, they still had a minor child. Following the techniques of Dillman, (1978; 2000) between October, 2000 and January, 2001, a mail survey was administered to potential respondents a total of 3 times, in addition to a reminder/thank you post card. Using this technique, the author obtained a 39% response rate. This is somewhat lower than Dillman reports and lower than the author has obtained in previous (unpublished) research. However, divorced fathers are a difficult population to contact; furthermore, the survey was administered during the November and December holidays, which Dillman does not recommend.

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 127 divorced fathers who lived in the states of Maine or New Hampshire at the time of their divorce and who had no physical custody of their children. (This is a sub-sample of a larger study involving 316 divorced fathers with varying types of physical custodial arrangements.) The sample was overwhelmingly white, which is representative of both of these New England states, with the mean age of the participants at 39.38. Fathers reported a mean household income of \$43,000 and an education level that is commensurate with having obtained some college education, but not a full degree. These demographics are similar to the general population in Maine and New Hampshire (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

The vast majority of fathers, 91%, had joint legal custody or joint decision-making power. With regard to marital status, 40% of the fathers reported having re-married, 21% were living with a partner and 39% had remained divorced/single. A high percent of fathers, 42%, reported living with children—either their partner’s children, or children who had been born since their divorce. The fathers in this study live within close proximity to their children, with 50% reporting that they live within 10 miles of their children and another 15% within 30 miles. Only 15% of the fathers lived more than 100 miles from their children, with a median of 15 miles between fathers and their children. As a way to randomly select one child about whom they should report, fathers were asked to report about their eldest child. Fifty-two percent of these “target” children were boys; their mean age was 10.8.

Measures

The author designed the questionnaire for this study in which fathers were asked to report on their various levels of involvement such as days and nights of contact, attendance at children’s events, participation in decision-making, custodial arrangements, and demographic information. Table 1 illustrates some of the survey questions.

Fathers were asked to use a blank four-week calendar to record the number of days and nights that they regularly had contact with their children (as displayed in Table 2). When fathers reported that they only saw their children during summers and holidays, the annual number of days of contact was divided by 12 to replicate a monthly schedule of contact. Other measures included fathers’ attendance at school events and extracurricular activities (categorical variables), the geographic

TABLE 1. Selected Survey Topic Areas and Sample Questions

Topic Area	Survey Question
Daily or nightly contact	Fathers were asked to check regular days and nights of contact on a four week calendar.
School activities	In the 1999-2000 school year, how many times did you attend or visit your target child's school for an event, such as a sporting event, school performance, volunteer activity, open house, or parent-teacher conferences? (1 = None, 5 = 10 or more)
Extra-curricular activities	How about non-school extracurricular activities such as music lessons/concerts, dance lessons/recitals, religious activities, scouting events, etc.? How many of these events have you attended in the last 12 months? (1 = None, 5 = 10 or more)
Decision-making about child	Sometimes when parents divorce one of the parents makes most of the decisions regarding the life of the child, such as education, medical attention, religious training, and extracurricular activities. However, other times parents share these activities. Which of the following statements best describes your situation? (1 = Mom makes all, 2 = Mom makes most, 3 = Share equally, 4 = Dad makes most, 5 = Dad makes all)
Celebration of holidays	Within the past 12 months, did you celebrate a holiday, such as a birthday, Christmas, or another significant holiday with your child? (1 = yes, 0 = no)

TABLE 2. Survey Questions Addressing Contact Between Father and Child

The following questions ask you about how often you usually spend time with your target child. Please think about the regular schedule you have with your child in a usual month. On the calendar below, place a check on each day that you normally spend any time with your child. For example, if you have supper together every Tuesday night, then you would place a check on each Tuesday in the calendar. If the schedule with your child varies between the school year and summer vacation please explain this on the back page of the survey, but fill out the schedule that happens most frequently (for example, the school year) in the calendar below.

Please indicate DAYS that you usually spend ANY time with your child.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 2	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 4	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 6	<input type="checkbox"/> 7
<input type="checkbox"/> 8	<input type="checkbox"/> 9	<input type="checkbox"/> 10	<input type="checkbox"/> 11	<input type="checkbox"/> 12	<input type="checkbox"/> 13	<input type="checkbox"/> 14
<input type="checkbox"/> 15	<input type="checkbox"/> 16	<input type="checkbox"/> 17	<input type="checkbox"/> 18	<input type="checkbox"/> 19	<input type="checkbox"/> 20	<input type="checkbox"/> 21
<input type="checkbox"/> 22	<input type="checkbox"/> 23	<input type="checkbox"/> 24	<input type="checkbox"/> 25	<input type="checkbox"/> 26	<input type="checkbox"/> 27	<input type="checkbox"/> 28

distance between fathers and their children (continuous variable), as well as how much child support fathers pay each month (continuous variable). A measure addressing father participation in the decision-making about major event's in their children's lives was included in the questionnaire as well (categorical variable). Fathers were also asked to report about the amount of conflict that they have with the mother of their children. Fathers reported a mean of 3.10, where 1 = very high conflict and 5 = very low conflict. Finally, fathers reported on their adjustment to life post-divorce without their children. The mean rate of adjustment was 2.77, where 1 = very good adjustment and 5 = very poor adjustment.

Analysis

There were two parts of analysis for this study. First, data were tabulated to determine father-child contact and levels of involvement. In order to obtain means for the variables that measured fathers' attendance at children's activities, the variables were changed from categorical to continuous: the category of "1-3 times" was coded "2," "4-6 times" was

coded "5," "7-10 times" was coded "8," and "more than 10 times" was coded "12."

The second set of analyses examined the relationship between demographic variables, personal factors and father involvement. The dependent variables in these analyses were days and nights of monthly contact, attendance at school events and extracurricular activities, celebration of holidays with children, monthly child support payment and participation in decision-making about child's life. The predictive factors in each of the models were father income, father level of education, father marital status, father age, if father lives with other children, target child age, sex of target child, geographic distance between father and child, mother-father conflict and father post-divorce adjustment. Logistical regression analysis was used to predict holiday celebrations with children, multinomial logistical regression was used to predict father participation in decision-making, and ordinary least squares regression was used for all other analyses.

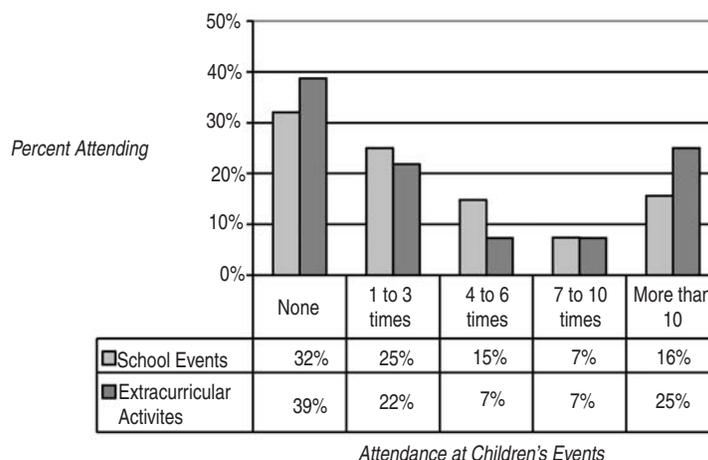
RESULTS

Prevalence of Father Involvement

Fathers reported seeing their children a mean number of 7.44 days per month. The median number of days of father-child contact was 6. Approximately one-tenth (12.5%) of the fathers reported never seeing their children on a regular basis. Of fathers who do see their children each month (excluding the "never" fathers), child contact was 8.56 days a month, with a median of 8 days. Fathers saw their children fewer nights each month, with a mean of 4.22 and median of 4 nights per month. One-fifth (21.01%) of fathers reported that their children never regularly spent the night when them. Tabulations of nightly contact excluding those who reported "never" resulted in a mean number of 5.3 nights per month, and a median of 4.

Table 3 displays father attendance at school events and extracurricular activities. Roughly one-third of fathers did not attend any school events or any extracurricular activities within the past twelve months. Of the fathers who did attend, there were peaks in attendance in the "1 to 3" category and the "over 10" category. The mean rates of attendance at school events and extracurricular activities were 3.8 and 4.3, respectively; the median for attendance at both types of events was 2.

TABLE 3. Father Involvement at School Events and Extracurricular Activities



Most fathers, 86.8% reported celebrating a major holiday, such as a birthday or Christmas, with their children in the past twelve months. With regard to child support payments, fathers reported that they were obligated to pay \$514 a month in child support; they reported actually paying \$511.

None of the fathers reported making “most” or “all” of the decisions about their children’s lives. Fathers responses about decision-making were fairly equally distributed among the remaining categories, with 32% of fathers reporting that mothers make “all” the decisions about their children, 36.8% reported that mothers make “most” of the decisions and 31.2% of fathers reported that they equally share in the decision-making about their children.

Predictors of Father Involvement

Table 4 displays the results of the ordinary least squares regression. The strongest predictors of father involvement were mother-father conflict and geographic distance between fathers and their children. Fathers who reported lower levels of conflict with the mothers of their children saw their children more days per month, attended more school events and extracurricular activities, and were more likely to have celebrated a

TABLE 4. Regression Analyses, Summary for Predictors of Father Involvement

Independent Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β
<i>Days of Contact Between Fathers and Children^a</i>			
Father level of education	.141	.347	.037
Father level of income	.618	.327	.184
Father marital status: Married ^f	-.927	1.399	-.078
Father marital status: Lives with partner ^f	-.987	1.464	-.069
Father age	.005	.099	.006
"Target" child age	-.430	.161	-.296**
Father lives with additional children	-1.417	1.247	-.121
"Target" child is a boy	-.173	1.042	-.015
Miles between father and "target" child	-.004	.001	-.374***
Conflict between parents	.798	.378	.191*
Father's level of post-divorce adjustment	.298	.575	.048
<i>Nights of Contact Between Fathers and Children^b</i>			
Father level of education	-.003	.254	-.001
Father level of income	.594	.240	.260*
Father marital status: Married ^f	.782	1.025	.097
Father marital status: Lives with partner ^f	.474	1.072	.049
Father age	-.050	.073	-.090
"Target" child age	-.218	.115	-.220
Father lives with additional children	-1.051	.913	-.132
"Target" child is a boy	-.794	.763	-.100
Miles between father and "target" child	-.002	.001	-.254**
Conflict between parents	.401	.277	.141
Father's level of post-divorce adjustment	-.035	.421	-.008
<i>Attendance at School Events^c</i>			
Father level of education	.075	.088	.082
Father level of income	.073	.083	.090
Father marital status: Married ^f	.175	.354	.061
Father marital status: Lives with partner ^f	-.389	.370	-.112
Father age	.036	.025	.180
"Target" child age	-.042	.041	-.119
Father lives with additional children	-.298	.315	-.105
"Target" child is a boy	-.164	.264	-.058
Miles between father and "target" child	-.001	.000	-.422***
Conflict between parents	.211	.096	.208*
Father's level of post-divorce adjustment	-.059	.146	-.039

Independent Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β
Attendance at Extracurricular Events^d			
Father level of education	-.180	.328	-.056
Father level of income	.231	.310	.081
Father marital status: Married ^f	1.068	1.323	.106
Father marital status: Lives with partner ^f	.109	1.384	.009
Father age	.172	.094	.248
“Target” child age	.255	.152	-.207
Father lives with additional children	-.743	1.179	-.075
“Target” child is a boy	-.932	.986	-.095
Miles between father and “target” child	-.002	.001	-.216*
Conflict between parents	.884	.357	.250*
Father’s level of post-divorce adjustment	-.127	.544	-.024
Monthly Child Support Payments Made^e			
Father level of education	26.288	23.790	.102
Father level of income	100.120	22.428	.436***
Father marital status: Married ^f	-.877	95.852	-.001
Father marital status: Lives with partner ^f	120.983	100.274	-.123
Father age	3.598	6.784	.064
“Target” child age	16.160	11.026	.163
Father lives with additional children	-72.102	85.420	-.090
“Target” child is a boy	-22.460	71.409	-.028
Miles between father and “target” child	.020	.064	.028
Conflict between parents	.678	25.891	.002
Father’s level of post-divorce adjustment	-26.452	39.401	-.062

Note: ^a $R^2 = .318$, ^b $R^2 = .212$, ^c $R^2 = .263$, ^d $R^2 = .154$, ^e $R^2 = .318$, ^f Reference category is “Single,” * $p \leq .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

major holiday with their children within the past 12 months ($\beta = 1.318$, Wald = 8.067, $p = .005$). Fathers who reported lower levels of conflict were 3.7 times more likely to celebrate a major holiday with their children than fathers who reported higher levels of conflict with mothers. Parental conflict was also a significant predictor of participation in decision-making. Fathers who reported that mothers make “most” of the decisions about their children reported a level of conflict that was 3.1 times higher than fathers who reported equally sharing in the decision-making about children’s lives.

Fathers who live further away from their children were less likely to be involved in their lives. These fathers spent fewer days and nights per

month with their children and attended fewer of their children events and activities.

Income was a significant predictor of three kinds of father involvement. Fathers who had higher levels of income reported spending more nights with their children and paid more children support. Fathers with higher levels of income were 2.7 times more likely to celebrate a major holiday with their children than fathers with lower levels of income ($\beta = .982$, Wald = 5.973, $p = .015$).

Two child factors were predictors of father involvement. Fathers who reported having younger children reported spending fewer days per month with their children. Fathers who reported participating in decision-making equally with mothers were more likely to have female children than fathers who reported that mothers make most of the decisions about their children ($\beta = -1.392$, Wald = 4.700, $p = .030$, odds ratio = .249).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to provide information about father involvement in the states of Maine and New Hampshire. The results indicate that although there are some differences, father involvement in these states is commensurate with father involvement in other areas of the country. Days of contact are somewhat higher, with a median of eight days of contact per month among fathers who see their children. This difference may be accounted for by the fact that father involvement across the country has recently been reported to be on the rise (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997); it may also be explained by a regional difference or respondent bias. Since few studies have focused on nights of contact between fathers and their children, this study could help to provide a baseline estimate of this type of involvement. Of the fathers in this study, one-fifth of fathers reported never regularly spending the night with their children. However, over one-quarter of the fathers spent the night with their children between four and five times a month.

The majority of the fathers in this study live relatively close to their children. Fifty percent of fathers lived within 10 miles of their children. Although this author chose to report the median number of miles between fathers and children because it is a better measure of the actual

distance, a mean of 241 miles is comparable to other studies that reported means between 177 and 388 (Arditti, 1992; Stephen et al., 1993).

The finding that roughly 25% of the fathers reported attending a school event or an extracurricular activity is similar to other findings regarding school events (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). The participation of fathers in decision-making has been studied by Seltzer (Judith A. Seltzer, 1991) who found that of fathers who discuss their children with their ex-wives, over 50% have no influence on the decisions made about their children's lives. Only 30% of the fathers in this study reported no participation in decision-making. This latter finding is noticeably smaller than what Seltzer found using data from 1987-1988, which may reflect further changes in the involvement of divorced fathers. The fathers in this study reported a very high level of compliance with child support orders. As found in other studies, fathers report a higher rate of compliance than mothers (Braver, 1998) which may explain the discrepancy between this study and others which have collected data from mothers.

There are a number of limitations of this research. First, because this study focuses on father involvement in northern New England, the results may not be generalizable to other populations. Second, there was a low response rate of 39%, indicating that fathers who responded may not be representative of all divorced fathers in Maine and New Hampshire. These fathers may tend to be more involved, or they may have wanted to communicate especially difficult outcomes of their divorces. Third, measures using self-reports are never as reliable as using an objective rating system, thus, one should be cautious of respondent bias in the interpretation of these results.

This study found that the most important predictors of father involvement are parental conflict and geographic distance between fathers and their children. Fathers who reported high levels of conflict with the mothers of their children were much less involved in their children's lives than fathers who reported lower levels of involvement. For those decisions-makers and practitioners who strive to keep fathers in northern New England involved with their children, programs and policies to diffuse parental conflict or to keep parents from moving significant distances from one another may be especially pertinent to preserving healthy father-child relationships.

Parental conflict is an area that has been addressed by many state legislatures, such as through mandated mediation or the development of parenting plans. Policy-makers, practitioners and scholars must identify methods to help divorced parents reduce their level of conflict for the

well-being of their children. Additionally, practitioners who work with families may want to inform both mothers and fathers about the importance of living in the same geographic region—a topic that was addressed by the California Supreme Court in April 2004. The court ordered that custody be shifted from a custodial mother wanting to move across the country with her children, to a noncustodial father who wanted the children to remain nearby (Dolan, 2004). Rather than battling such issues in the courtroom, policy-makers could recommend that language concerning geographic proximity be written into a “public policy statement” in statutes that address issues such as joint legal custody, joint decision-making, custody arrangements, and contact with both of the children’s parents—issues that are commonly addressed in most state statutes. States could even adopt legislation that mirrors the ruling of the California Supreme Court, that moving children away from a parent is not in the best interest of the children. Finally, the importance of geographic proximity could also be addressed in divorce education classes that are mandated in the state of New Hampshire and offered in the state of Maine.

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