

## Understanding Fathering among Urban Native American Men

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**Abstract:** *This study explores fathering among self identified Native American men who have been identified as father or father figure to children involved in the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project. This research study highlights United States policies and their effects on Native American families particularly fathers. In addition, Native American fathers in this study reported that “being there” for their child was important and described how the manifestation of being there ranged from traditional to contemporary models of fathering. The article concludes with a discussion of specific issues that are important when working with Native fathers that may be of interest to social workers and social service practitioners.*

**Keywords:** *Fathering, Native American, race*

### INTRODUCTION

There is a growing interest in the role of fathers and fathering in America. One could argue that fathering has become a contemporary social, as well as political, issue. This awareness is supported by an increased number of grassroots organizations supporting fathers, research in this area of scholarship, and the more visible, active roles fathers are taking with their children today. The study of fathering is important, given that research continues to indicate that fathers have a significant impact upon the lives of young children. Although fathers are important, very little has been written or studied about fathering in some communities of color. This article uses qualitative data from the National Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (EHSREP) to explore Native men and their perceptions of fatherhood.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The research shows there is a positive relationship between fathers' involvement and infants' early physical, mental, and social development (Dubowitz et al., 2001; Klitzing, Simoni, Amsler, & Burgin, 1999; Pedersen, 1987; Pedersen, Rubenstein, & Yarrow, 1979; Shears & Robinson, 2005; Toth & Xu, 1999; Yogman, Kindlon, & Earls, 1995). Even though the parenting literature supports the importance of parents in general, Lamb (1997), and Magill-Evans, Harrison, and Burke (1999) all agree that fathers contribute differently to infant developmental outcomes when compared to mothers. These differences in interactions suggest that fathers offer something unique to early infant development.

The fathering research literature has suggested that fathering is in a state of transition as more fathers embrace contemporary versus traditional roles. Shears, Summers, Boller,

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and Barclay-McLaughlin (2006) suggest that the traditional view of fathers in American society is one of provider, protector, role model, and teacher. Although men still find value in traditional roles, many fathers are currently articulating a more contemporary fathering role. Some of these contemporary roles include father as caregiver, as a partner with the child's mother, and as a source of affection and emotional support (Lamb, 1997; White, Godfrey, & Moccasin, 2006).

Much of the link between positive child outcomes and fathering practices has been established through quantitative analysis that has merely identified the key variables and outcomes involved. While important, more information regarding the lived experiences of fathers is needed. By understanding the lived experiences of fathers themselves, family practitioners will be able to better understand how men construct their identities as fathers, and will be able to provide more sufficient services to them and their children. The issue of discussing fathering with fathers is essential because much of what is known historically about fathers' parenting attitudes and experiences came from mothers' reports (Shears et al., 2006; Tanfer & Mott, 1997).

In addition to the limitations of quantitative research and mothers' reports on fathering, there is very little research on Native fathers. Historically, fathering has been examined more frequently in western middle-class and well-educated families; however, researchers have recently suggested a need for research on perceptions of fatherhood among minority populations (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2002; Palcovitz, 2002). Several studies have found differences in fathering roles across racial and ethnic groups (Houssain, Field, Pickens, Malphurs, & Del Valle 1997; Mincy, 2002; Toth & Xu, 1999). This suggests that the roles that men embrace as fathers can also be impacted by one's race and ethnicity.

Since research and documentation of fathering is based primarily on Anglo communities, a predominantly Anglo model for fathering is viewed as the benchmark and thus, socially normative for all other men (Furman & Collins, 2005). These social norms and fathering standards can be deceiving and, in many cases, lead to improper and misleading conclusions regarding fathering in communities of color. To this end, more research is needed in minority and, more particularly, tribal communities. Native peoples and tribal communities (urban, rural, suburban, geographically isolated, etc.) are complex and present challenges for social work practitioners attempting to acquire more culturally competent practices. Since most of the current fathering literature applies to non-Native fathers, it is important to explore how fathering may differ in these communities. As a result, this qualitative study explores fathering within the urban Native family context.

### **Historical Overview**

Historically, federal Indian policies and colonization have had and continue to have a profound impact on the role of Indigenous families and, in particular, on Native fathers (Noriega, 1992; White et al., 2006). Loss of land, lifestyle changes, and role changes in traditional family organization, clan, and kinship have also impacted the role of male relatives, grandparents, and the specific role of fathers within the Native family structure

(Diedrich, 1995; Duran & Duran, 1995; Heller, Cunningham, & Heller, 2003; White et al., 2006).

Tribal societies in the U.S. were largely communal and self-sustaining prior to European conquest. As European dominance of North America escalated, treaties with tribes created a basis for non-tribal land title and established defined land areas reserved by the tribes. Entire tribes were forced into dependency on the U.S. military for all means of daily sustenance. As the military role gave way to long term management of tribal people and lands, federal policies shifted toward forced assimilation of tribes into U.S. society. Of particular concern to lawmakers was the persistence of tribal communal lifestyles as opposed to the individual capitalist ideal. The 1887 Dawes Act broke up tribally held land into individual allotments for agricultural development and grazing. This process disrupted extended family systems and altered the traditional role of fathers significantly. Unallotted lands were made available for non-Native homesteads; thus tribal communities were further impacted by the proximity of non-Native practices and influences. Despite this influence, many tribal societies resisted assimilation and were resilient despite oppressive federal Indian policies.

Persistent poverty, acculturation, substance abuse, and historical trauma resulting from federal Indian policy continue to impact Native family life today (Duran, Duran & Braveheart, 1998; Garrett & Pichette, 2000; Lafromboise, Medoff, Lee, & Harris, 2007). The cumulative impact from specific federal Indian policies during relocation, allotment, forced boarding school, repression of Native spirituality, and persistent poverty and unemployment contributed to the emasculation of Native men (White et al., 2006). Currently, father absence for Native dads is significant and remains among the highest in the country (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). At the same time Natives have a higher percentage of male-maintained households than do other minorities, with 9% of Native households being male-maintained where no female partner is present (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Forced boarding school policies had a profound and traumatic impact on the Native American family unit and the tribal community (Duran et al., 1998; Flemming, 1992; Noriega, 1999; White et al., 2006). For almost a century, Native American children were forcefully removed from their families, communities, and tribes and sent to boarding schools under oppressive assimilation policies with the goal of cultural/tribal eradication and assimilation into the dominant society. The Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934 ended the legal and federally sanctioned abduction of children, although children were still removed from their homes and sent to boarding schools or 'foster families' (Noriega, 1992). Some have theorized that this policy had a significant impact on Native families, given the overrepresentation of Native children in child abuse cases, placement in the child welfare system, and in child fatalities (Petit & Curtis, 1997). The coerced acculturation interrupted traditional fathering practices and extended family structures resulting in dramatic and immediate changes in tribal family life styles, as well as identity (Hossain et al., 1999; Mirandi, 1991; Morrisette, 1994; Weaver & White, 1999; White et al., 2006). The absence of adult family role models within the boarding school structure impacted emotional development in children, many of whom later developed significant problems with depression, alcoholism, and violent behavior as adults (Swinomish Tribal

Mental Health Project, 1991). One might hypothesize that, with the lack of Native masculine role models for fathering, Native boys were significantly affected in their understanding and access to Native fathers as role models.

Forced relocation, allotment, boarding school practices, and loss of traditional roles forced tribal members to become dependent on government food distribution programs and welfare to sustain their families. This process undermined the role of fathers and increased the likelihood that Native children would grow up in an uninvolved or absent father home. The loss of male influence within the family can be traced to a loss of cultural practices, traditions, and rituals that once sustained tribal communities.

Within many traditional Native communities, fathers were neither the primary disciplinarian nor childcare provider, yet there were significant ways in which fathers contributed in child rearing activities (Hossain, 2001; Hossain et al., 1999). In male warrior societies, men's traditional roles to provide, protect, teach, and bring honor, whether as hunter, healer, scout, or warrior, were fairly common within a myriad of precontact tribal communities. In some western tribes, a father's role included taking over the primary role of instruction when sons turned eight or during latency-age years to train with him as a hunter and warrior (Diedrich, 1995). Being a warrior may not be viewed in a contemporary sense as an essential requirement for adulthood in all tribal communities, yet many contemporary tribal programs and initiatives encourage the reclaiming of warrior identities and are providing enculturation for young men as warriors (Vanas, 2003; White et al., 2006).

In the precontact milieu in a number of tribal communities, neither the father's or mother's role included negative interaction with their children; instead, extended family members served as the disciplinarians. Thus Native fathers and mothers were able to provide warmth and support for their children in unconditional ways (White et al., 2006). With the introduction of federal Indian policies, particularly assimilation policies, implementing a rigid boarding school curriculum institutionalizing non-Native gender identities and gender roles had significant impacts on the traditional roles for Native men (hunter, warrior, scout, healer, etc.) and created barriers for them as fathers. However, the change in traditional male roles might also create other opportunities for fathers to spend more time in interaction with their children in non-punitive ways which, for many Native men, may be a reclaiming of a traditional parenting style.

Today there is a resurgence of asserting tribal sovereignty via language reclamation, spiritual and healing practices, and cultural and tribal specific activities. Interestingly, enculturation has recently been suggested as a protective factor for Native adolescents (LaFromboise, Hoyt, Oliver, & Whitbeck, 2004). Enculturation is embraced informally across all of Indian Country as a key aspect of treatment and healing initiatives. Tribal communities throughout Native America are bringing back traditional activities and exploring ways to reclaim positive Native identities for their children. Native Hawaiian parents are learning the Hawaiian language on the internet. Northwest tribes have engaged youth with traditional paddling trips on the ocean to neighboring tribal communities. Pueblos in the Southwest continue to teach their youth tribal ceremonial dance and spiritual practices. Men's camp circles and reclaiming of warrior identities are

two contemporary areas in which Native men are specifically engaging in reclaiming traditional identities (Vanas, 2003; White Bison, Inc., 2002). Organizations like the Native American Fatherhood & Families Association (NAFFA, 2007) are working to strengthen Native American families by increasing the involvement of Native fathers. NAFFA uses the “fatherhood is sacred” model that encourages traditional Native culture and beliefs. In British Columbia, Canada the Indigenous Fathers Project was created to explore First Nations and Metis fathers’ experiences of becoming fathers. A documentary was created from the Indigenous Fathers Project as the participants felt this was the best way to share with other Indigenous peoples what had been learned in the fathering project.

### **Native Fathers**

While there is both quantitative and qualitative research on fathering in mainstream populations, there is very little research available on contemporary Native fathering practices and significantly less investigation of Native fathering with preschool-aged children. There are, however, some trends reflected in historical and current literature that should be considered. In 1980, Native adolescents from 24 different states participated in a study that examined their perceptions of their fathers; researchers found clear evidence that Native adolescents want their fathers to become more involved in their parenting role (Stinnett, King, & Rowe, 1980). Fifty-seven percent said they were not close to their dads yet most reported that they respected their dads in the way elders are respected across tribal communities. Another historical study by French (1979) noted that similarly situated Native junior high students had lower self-esteem than their white classmates. Stinnett et al. (1980) suggest that lower self-esteem experienced by Native adolescents could be related to the lower involvement that Native dads had with their adolescents, suggesting that increased involvement could impact self-esteem for Native youth.

Research supports the idea that father involvement has a positive effect on young Native boys. Radin, Williams, and Coggins (1993) conducted an exploratory study of Ojibwa families to determine the relationship between father and mother involvement, academic performance, traditional values, and social performance. Increased time spent with fathers as primary caregivers was associated with higher academic achievement, as well as better social development for boys, while the role of mothers was particularly salient given the strong leadership roles and the centrality of women in those communities. The study supports the idea that cultural identity promotes resiliency (LaFromboise et al., 2004). Fathers and mothers who are secure in their own Native identities may help to provide a secure cultural identity for their children (Radin et al., 1993). Interestingly, in another study with Navajo families, father involvement in caretaking activities and across genders was significant, yet there were noted differences in academic-related nurturance since mothers spent significantly more time with children in academic-related caretaking. In the Navajo tribe there is significant tribal importance placed on maternal lineage. Researchers in this study emphasized how critical it was to note the recent importance and emphasis placed on the value of education in Navajo communities across class and education lines, since education is currently viewed as vital in terms of future economic security (Hossain et al., 1999). It should be noted that

historical governmental policy has brought a number of changes in tribal structure; such as the move from reservations to cities (first via federal policy and now for employment) which has created less time for many Native fathers to spend with their children (Hossain et al., 1999).

Despite these policies, a study by Kaye (2005) shows that Native fathers had a high level of involvement in Early Head Start (EHS) center committees, by serving on advisory boards, working in the classroom, bringing children and picking them up, attending home visits, and helping in maintaining center grounds. To appreciate the fathering experience among Native families, one must understand the historical policies that have had generational effects and the continued effects of those policies for Native fathers today.

## METHODS

This exploratory study seeks to join a growing body of research on the lived experience of non-White fathers by exploring attitudes, experiences, and perceptions of self identified urban Native fathers of children involved in the EHSREP. This study used qualitative methods to analyze the qualitative questionnaire embedded in a larger data set. The guiding research question for this study asked, how do different fathers involved in Early Head Start perceive fathering?

### Early Head Start

EHS focuses on enhancing the child's development and supports the family during the critical first three years of the child's life. As a result, it is a two-generation program that includes intensive services that begin before the child is born. A consortium of 17 researcher sites and federal funding agencies working in partnership with the National Early Head Start office conducted a national evaluation of program implementation and impacts. The EHSREP centers on the mother as the source of information but also includes a set of studies that focuses specifically on fathers as the primary respondents. The father studies help to fill a significant gap in knowledge by increasing our understanding of how fathers, in the context of their family and the Early Head Start program, influence infant and toddler development. Data related to participating fathers were collected at the child's age of 24 months at 12 sites. The father study contained an embedded qualitative study involving audio taped, open-ended questions, interspersed throughout the quantitative interview. Thus, the overall design of this mixed-methods research could be characterized as predominantly quantitative, with an embedded qualitative component conducted parallel to the quantitative study (Creswell, Clark, Gutman, & Hanson, 2003). Data for this report were taken from the interviews of men who were reported to be the father or father figure of the EHS child at 24 months.

### Participants

This study includes the narratives from 18 urban Native fathers and father figures who participated in this qualitative study. Each of these men was interviewed around the time their child was 24 months old. Mothers involved in the EHS identified the

participants in this study as the father or father figure of their two year old child or focus child in the EHSREP. Given the requirements for enrollment in EHS, these men are considered to be fathers in low-income families. Most of the fathers interviewed (67%) reported being the resident biological father of the focus child, while 22% reported being residential other father type. The focus child of these fathers was 39% female and 61% male. All eighteen fathers reported having completed high school with 40% reported at least one year of college or more. Fathers reported a monthly mean income of \$1392 with a standard deviation of \$985 and a range of \$0 to \$3000 a month. Fathers' reported mean age was 31 years old with a standard deviation of 7.7 years and a range of 19 to 47 years.

### **The Interview**

This study included an embedded qualitative instrument designed to produce more open-ended narrative information about fathering. Very little was known about low-income Native fathers, thus, this study was necessary to explore a general sense of the roles of Native fathers in the lives of their children. The qualitative interview instrument included six primary areas of inquiry and was designed to assist in the generation of new hypotheses about fathers and their involvement in children's lives.

The qualitative instrument explored the perception of fathering and the areas of inquiry included: What does "being a good father" mean to you? How has becoming a father impacted your life? Talk about your experiences with your own father. What kinds of help or support do you get to do your job as a father? What gets in the way of being a good father? and What are you proudest of about your child? Interviewers follow up the fathers' initial responses to these questions with additional probes to gather more details in each of six primary areas of inquiry. Interviewers were trained in qualitative interview techniques and also participated on conference calls to discuss and make revisions to the additional probes being used. This type of peer debriefing and charting of the revised probes adds to the overall credibility of the study (Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002).

Two authors from the study did the coding. A Native American Studies scholar and third author, a Native male researcher, developed initial codes and categories. Data analysis involved describing trends in the data, as well as interpretative techniques. Detailed information, the context in which responses were presented, integration across comments, agreement across participants, and meanings offered relative to cultural phenomena were all taken into consideration in the analysis. The researchers read through the data multiple times using a line-by-line analysis of comments in order to determine patterns and trends in the data, using the constant comparison method (Lindlof & Bryan, 2002; Strauss & Corbin 1998). Using this approach, the data were coded, discussed, separated into categories, and further discussed as to the distinctiveness and difference of the categories.

## **RESULTS**

This EHSREP qualitative study included participating Native fathers and their responses to six open-ended questions regarding their experiences as fathers. These

questions and an analysis of them are presented here for discussion and consideration for future areas of research on Native fathers.

### **Availability and Engagement**

Fathers were asked, “*What does being a ‘good father’ mean to you?*” A consistent theme that Native fathers identified as being a good father was being available and actively engaged with their children. In discussing “availability” fathers included being physically present, being emotionally available, and showing up for their children. Being engaged included spending quality time, a willingness to actively engage, and to be in the moment with their children. Availability and engagement also furthered a participant’s ability to provide, protect, and care for his child. When fathers talked about availability it often included an example of urgency in which they perceived their children needed them in that place and time for a specific reason. For example, one father explained, “*Like when they’re sick or don’t feel good or if they want something.*” While a number of fathers included, “*Being there when they need you.*” Many of the fathers included ‘responsibility’, which several said their own fathers had not displayed, as important in being a good father. When fathers were available and engaged with their children, they viewed themselves as being responsible fathers. Participants also identified teaching their children as a part of engagement in activities with their children as important to being a good father. Throughout the interview many of the Native fathers contextualized their answers in relation to what they experienced as sons from their own fathers. One father shared, “*Pretty much just spending all kinds of time with them, sharing your time, playing with them, and being there when they need you. In general, just being there ... for the good and the bad.*” Another dad added:

*I see people with their children. It’s inspirational to see fathers with their children. You very rarely see fathers in their children’s lives...you see the mother all the time, but not the father. You want to teach him something—Teach him our culture and don’t take him down the wrong path.*

These Native fathers generally defined their roles as fathers in traditional terms, as the provider and protector who has responsibility in these areas for children. However, fathers also acknowledged their role in a child’s emotional stability and daily activities such as cooking, reading stories, and taking care of a sick child.

### **Change in Perspective**

Fathers were also asked, *How has becoming a father impacted your life?* Fathers discussed many different examples of how becoming a father changed their perspective with regard to responsibilities and changed their behavior to fit their role as a father. Many of the fathers discussed the role of their child as central within their families. Most fathers were reflective of how fathering gave new meaning to their lives. One dad shared, “*My life changed a lot because everything has meaning to me now—not just being a father.*” In reflecting on how their perspective has changed, a number of dads shared how they have changed past at-risk behaviors since becoming a father:

*Yeah, it's changed my life completely. I'm away from drugs and alcohol. I don't hang around the bars like I used to when I was younger. I got something at home to look forward to; I don't have to go out nowhere to get it.*

When considering how fatherhood has impacted their lives, these dads reflected upon their own childhoods and compared their fathering ability to their own dads.

*I kind of figured it wouldn't be anything like it was when I was brought up. I knew it would be better than that. I knew it was going to work no matter what it took to do better than the way I was brought up.*

### **Father Figures and Positive Role Models**

We later asked men to, *Talk about your experiences with your own father.* All of the dads in this study identified a father or father figure with the exception of one participant who revealed that he didn't have a male father figure growing up. The participants identified a father, stepfather, uncle, and, in one instance, a boyfriend of an Auntie as significant father figures. In Native families, people can be related by blood, clan, marriage, formal adoption, and, in some instances, in an "Indian way."

While many of the participants in this study discussed serious challenges from their families of origin, most of the participants talked about the positive role models they experienced from their father or father figures. Participants discussed the activities they did with their fathers, which provided meaning for them in considering the father figures in their lives. Those activities included hunting, fishing, archery, walking, road trips, and three wheeling. Other participants talked about their fathers as being present in their homes yet absent in their lives; this seems to have increased their own commitment as fathers to be present for their children as discussed above. In discussing missing fathers, some participants talked about how other father figures stepped in as positive role models. One participant shares: *"My experience with him was pretty good. I liked him and he did a lot for me...more than what my real father did for me when I was younger anyway."* These dads acknowledged the positive role modeling they experienced with their own father figures, which seemed particularly important as participants themselves now understood the demands of being fathers themselves:

*He really wasn't one to talk a lot. But when he said something, he usually said something quite important...kind of straight to the heart kind of thing. And just by his examples as well. He loved all his kids and provides for his wife and stuff as well.*

In their comments about the positive role modeling with their own father figures, participants discussed the importance of activities that their father figures engaged in with them and how that modeled for them how to engage with their own children:

*Every weekend he would grab us up, put us in the car, take a little journey somewhere, places that we never experienced before. Other parts of the city, upstate, out of town, farms. He did a lot with us you know and that's what I like to do with my kids.*

Participants, in describing their role in guiding or teaching their children, also shared the importance of teaching or conveying traditional cultural knowledge by teaching “culture”, “religion”, and language to their children.

### **Familial and Interpersonal Support Systems**

We also asked participants about, *What kinds of help or support do you get to do your job as a father?* Most of the participants in this study identified extended family, particularly their siblings, as their primary source of help or support in their roles as fathers and almost all of the participants identified relational support systems as being important. Family by definition in Native communities generally includes extended family; thus the role of siblings and other family members providing support for Native fathers may be viewed as critical. Participants also identified the child’s mom as a significant source of support for fathers in this study. Being able to talk with the child’s mom and other relatives about fathering was acknowledged as particularly significant. One dad shared:

*Yeah, my wife she’s been a big part of that...and my brother, talking to him, seeing how he does things. The combination of the two has played a major role in my life.*

For many tribes parenting historically included extended family relatives and fathers in this study acknowledged the importance of interacting and including family members in their role as fathers. A number of the participants indicated a program or service that assisted them in their roles as fathers including Early Head Start, program parents, school psychologist, and Medicaid. Some of the fathers saw their friends as a source of support and two of the fathers identified themselves as their primary source of support in their job as a father. One dad responded that his children are his support: *“My kids help me out in many ways cause I like to cook. My sons like to watch me cook. They help me cook, actually.”*

Fathers identified various sources of support, both personal and institutional that were important to them as fathers. It is interesting to note that Pollack and Levant (1998) suggest that men are less likely than women to seek help or support. However it appears that these men utilized various support systems in their role as father.

### **Finances**

Understanding the barriers to fathering is also important. As a result we asked men, *What gets in the way of being a father?* Three of the fathers said there was nothing that got in the way of being a father. Most of the fathers identified challenges in the expenses involved in raising children, the difficulties in dealing with illness and injuries, the developmental challenges they face as children grow and change, and the permanence of the responsibility of being a father. One father shared that:

*I think everything in life is challenging. As far as actual downsides of being a father, not really. I can’t think of anything bad about it.*

Given the financial constraints and challenges for many of the fathers in this study, it is interesting to note that few mentioned negative experiences. This demonstrates the importance and cultural significance of being a father with less emphasis on materialism as a measure of success. Another father said, *“It’s really tough when you’re a student and working, to spend time with the family. My wife and I really do try to spend as much time as we can with her.”*

One father did not find any barriers and stated:

*It’s a lot of responsibility. I work to do the best I can to make them happy; it’s what makes me happy, the quality time is what’s important to me.... Nah it’s pretty fun, it is.*

Another dad pointed out the difficulty of the toddler years in saying:

*Not really. This is my first kid. She hasn’t really been a pain until she got a little older...the potty training is the hardest part.... Trying to get her off the pacifier. She won’t let that go for nothing.*

### **Children are Amazing**

We lastly asked fathers to share, *What are you proudest of about your child?* Mostly, fathers were proud of and in awe of their children’s abilities to learn, as well as their intelligence and the connection of those gifts to their roles as their fathers. One proud father shared:

*The way she learns. She picks up so fast. She’s the smartest kid I’ve ever seen. Our friend’s two year old don’t talk the way she does. She can sit down and talk to you—have a conversation.*

Another father shared a difficult story about his son’s health:

*He went through four surgeries (he was born with cleft palette syndrome) before he was a year old and he’s taken it so well. Every time he opened his eyes after surgery it was me and his mom he seen. He’s been real good.*

Another father said:

*He’s a very intelligent, very active young man. He’s more—to me—he’s the youngest he speaks more, speaks his mind more. He tells—he gives them (siblings) advice that they listen to because of his intelligence. Some things he surprises me with, the things he says.*

While another father reflected:

*There are so many things. We really didn’t set any formal expectations or anything like that with her. She’s never and never has, in our minds, let us down.*

### **Engaging with Fathers and Conveying Cultural Knowledge**

Engagement in activities with fathers is an overarching theme discussed by participants in a myriad of ways in this study. Participants identified engaging in

activities with their own children as important and a way in which they defined themselves both as fathers and Natives. They also reflected and talked about their father figures and the activities they engaged in with them growing up, which included skipping rocks, walking the beach, road trips, making particular foods, going to market, hunting, fishing, using a bow, etc. Understanding their own language, cultural activities, and Native identity were also discussed. The impact of absent fathers was notable as was the importance placed on the fathering role. When father figures didn't engage with their sons, this was a particular area where participants shared negative experiences:

*When I was in elementary school I was passing grades—I was in baseball league one year, and he really didn't pay much attention to that. So I really didn't pay much attention to him, and I started getting all (F's?)E's in school and everything and he grounded me to my room.*

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that Native fathers feel strongly that it is important to be “present” in addition to “being there” in the lives of their children. Since a number of fathers discussed the absence of their own fathers, even when those fathers were physically present, it is important to note in this study that the idea of “being present” was particularly important to Native fathers as demonstrated in other research on fathers (Shears, Furman, & Nalini, 2007). Orientation in a Native worldview is in the present and for Native fathers, being present and engaged with their children was as important, if not more salient, as “being there.” At the same time, Native fathers discussed the importance of engaging in activities with their children and increased father involvement, both of which are associated with better academic and social outcomes for Native children. A number of fathers also seemed to communicate that fatherhood saved them from at-risk behaviors and gave them a sense of purpose in life. One might hypothesize that the relationship between father and child was mutually beneficial. Although we know there are benefits to children of having engaged fathers present, we need to further explore the benefits to fathers of being an active father. Given the high incidence of father absence in Native populations, it is interesting that Native fathers in this study evidence similar perspectives of good fathering to middle-income Anglo fathers. One might question the amount of stress that is caused in the attempt to “be there” with fewer financial resources. As a result, one might ask if low-income fathers are more stressed in their attempt to be there for their child.

Native fathers also emphasized that they wanted to teach their children culture, language, and traditional activities. The importance of enculturation was an interesting finding, since other researchers have suggested that enculturation may serve as a protective factor and a way to encourage resiliency for Native children in spite of persistent poverty and other challenges (LaFromboise et al., 2004). Several studies found that more than mere father presence was needed for Native children to report a sense of closeness to their fathers and social success (Radin et al., 1993; Stinnett et al., 1980).

When asked about the downside of fathering and the challenges in this role, most Native fathers replied there were none; when they did list a challenge, it was often

followed-up with how positive it was to be a father. Shears et al. (2006) noted a similar finding with low-income Mexican American fathers. The importance of children in Native communities is well documented historically, as was the role of parenting, which may support the ways in which Native fathers downplay the challenges in fathering their children. Engagement in the role of fathering may serve as a form of resiliency for fathers, particularly low-income fathers experiencing other challenges in their lives.

To this end, becoming a father may be a protective factor with some men in order to reduce their participation in at-risk behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use and membership in gangs. Some men report feeling a sense of purpose and responsibility once they become a father. These men suggest that becoming a dad saved them from the life they had been leading and caused them to become more socially compliant. Shears et al. (2007) found that many fathers perceived that becoming a father made them more responsible and accountable. We often cite how important fathers are to children and may need to explore how important becoming a father is to some men's well-being.

### **Limitations**

All of the Native fathers interviewed in this study were living in urban areas and, thus, may not be representative of fathers living in more rural, reservation, and geographically remote homeland areas in the United States. The results from this study are limited to young, urban fathers with primarily preschool-age children. Interviewers were neither familiar with nor trained in interviewing around culturally cued information and, when participants responded in culturally nuanced ways, these cues were not followed up. For example, some respondents were able to provide culturally relevant information regarding cooking, hunting, and teaching language to their children yet interviewers didn't follow up or explore their responses in any detail. Lastly, the interview instrument itself did not include probes to explore particular differences among fathers from different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

### **Implications**

As Natives continue to move into urban and suburban communities, social services practitioners and researchers need to understand their past histories and connection to homeland and cultural areas in order to provide more culturally relevant services. Many of the current social and health problems facing Native populations today have origins that refer to a history of trauma and oppressive federal policies which significantly impacted individuals, families, and communities. Healing is an ongoing process for many tribal communities. Social service practitioners need to acknowledge and be prepared to confront the grief experienced by the Native families if they are to be successful in providing services and understanding lived experiences of Native fathers (Brown & Shalett, 1997; Morrissette, 1994). Social service practitioners and researchers are realizing that more must be done to understand the lived experiences of Natives and how that experience relates to contemporary and historical federal policies impacting Indigenous peoples, specifically, Native men. Too often, cultural variables are misunderstood by the social service community and non-Natives working with Native populations. That is, the experience of Native men is often viewed through a lens of

individual pathology rather than contextualizing their personal and lived experiences as it relates to important cultural, family, tribal, and community variables and the historical, as well as political, context in which Native men live their lives. It is notable that Native men in this study exhibit an increased sense of self and accomplishment as a result of their engagement in fathering their children. The importance placed on the fathering role and experiencing success as a father is significant and could be incorporated by social work practitioners when working with Native populations.

A remarkable result of this research has been the way men expressed how becoming a father positively impacted other aspects of their lives. EHS programs that serve Native American populations should assist men in understanding the importance of fathering from the traditional sense, that their relationship is important to their child. In addition, some attention should be given to the stories of men who share that they benefitted from being a dad, and that sense of purpose they feel has led them to reevaluate their life's purpose. As child care centers attempt to engage fathers and encourage them be more involved, they can put more emphasis on helping men to understand how important fathering is to them. In addition, these centers with fathering programs need to assist and provide support to young fathers who may be a "little rough around the edges" as they transition to being a more stable adult and parent.

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