For most fathers, the decision to become engaged in more intimate, responsive relationships with their children seems to be a personal choice. But fathers’ decisions are often shaped by less obvious social, economic, and political circumstances not necessarily under their immediate control.

In figure 1.1 we begin to highlight the policy implications of this larger context by sketching how conventional and more progressive

![Figure 1.1 Transforming Expectations for Current Fathering Policies and Programs](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provider fathers (family men, married and residential)</th>
<th>Conventional Approach</th>
<th>Progressive Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Breadwinning and Marriage (Material Expectations)</td>
<td>Nurturance (Relational Expectations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of current policies</td>
<td>Nurturance and healthy relationships as direct goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Single targeted policy to secure financial support</td>
<td>Nurturance, financial support, and healthy relationships as direct goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple targeted policies to encourage employment and marriage</td>
<td>Nurturance, employment, and healthy relationships as direct goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Authors’ figure.
Consequently, initiatives to promote fathers’ nurturance are more likely to succeed when they are informed by an awareness of how the interpersonal and structural threads of gender and masculinity influence fathering and are woven into the four broad themes we emphasize. Noteworthy are men’s gendered approaches to the body (their own and others’), health (their own and others’), caregiving, coparenting, kin work, friendship, community networks and social support, paid work, and father-child bonding. Efforts to facilitate fathers’ nurturance also need to take into account the relationship between the ways men in more privileged positions construct their images of fatherhood and masculinity as compared to those in less privileged positions.

**Fathering as a Social Arrangement**

Fathering is inherently a social arrangement that begins with fathers themselves but that usually requires an array of critical partnerships between fathers and other concerned adults (see figure 1.2). These partnerships comprise a network of coparents, family and extended kin,

![Figure 1.2 Fathering as a Social Arrangement](source: Authors’ figure.)
Fathers’ experiences are also related to the experiences of previous generations, including their own fathers’ and mothers’, as well as their peers’ experiences—men of similar age who struggle with many of the same issues as fathers. Relationships with older generations and with peers indicate how important historical time can be, as expectations for fathers shift over decades because of changes in the economy, social norms and values, or even life expectancy and health. “No man is an island” applies especially to fathers who define their lives by how they are linked to their children’s lives. Father development in large part demands that men notice how their decisions about marriage, work, and health ripple directly into their children’s daily routines. In this way engaged fatherhood encourages men to support and nurture coming generations of children—their own biological children as well as other youth.

To understand the social psychological dimensions of men’s lives as fathers over time, we turn specifically to a model that captures how men construct their father identities, express themselves in a fatherly way, and manage their most immediate familial relations. Figure 1.3

**Figure 1.3 Model of Fathering Trajectories Over the Life Course: Social Psychological Domains**

Source: Authors’ adaption of Marsiglio (2009b).
couples to men’s parenting. What would it take, she asks, to promote father-child relationships apart from father-mother relationships? Can social policy make such a transition? How would this shift lead to reforms in family law, welfare policy, paternity establishment, and child support systems?

We begin our search for answers to these questions by identifying some of the most explicit and systematic policies and programs directed at men’s parenting, usually focusing on the couple relationship between a mother and father. However, we extend our attention beyond the immediate status of a relationship, be it marital, cohabiting, or friendly. Because relationships are dynamic we want to identify the critical moments when they change over time. We examine nonmarital and nonresident relationships that are located outside the purview of many policies and programs. The increasing pervasiveness of young unmarried couples, gay fathers, divorced parents, and multiple-partner parenting in extended family networks encourages us to examine the contexts for new coparenting processes.

Figures 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 show how a father’s family and household context can evolve from a residential arrangement to a simple nonresident fathering scenario to a more complex arrangement that includes two new sets of romantic partnerships and additional children in both households. Figures 4.2 and 4.3 highlight the reality that the transition to becoming a nonresident father involves a readjustment period in which fathers and families must decide how to distribute time and resources among both resident and nonresident children. We explore part of the readjustment process later by considering how fathers do kin work in order to remain productively involved with their children.

**Figure 4.1  Residential Fathering in a Couple-Focused Household**

Source: Authors’ figure.

Note: ——— lines represent adult ties within family and kin network from fathers’ perspective. ------ lines represent ties between adults and children.
These more complex family networks challenge us to create flexible programs that are responsive to the full range of dynamic coparenting that occurs outside of marriage or coresidence. In particular, we examine communication patterns and how trust is negotiated in intimate relationships so as to understand how these practices shape men’s involvement with children. Policies and programs already directly influence coparenting relations, but they could play an even more constructive role in

Figure 4.2 Nonresident Fathering

![Diagram of Nonresident Fathering]

Source: Authors' figure.
Note: —— lines represent adult ties within family and kin network from fathers’ perspective. •••• lines represent ties between adults and children.

Figure 4.3 Fathering Across Households in Complex Networks

![Diagram of Fathering Across Households in Complex Networks]

Source: Authors’ figure.
Note: —— lines represent adult ties within family and kin network from fathers’ perspective. •••• lines represent ties between adults and children. ■ and □ boxes represent new households for the father and mother and, in this example, new partnerships as well. Stick figures shaded the same color represent original family groups.
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guided by parental figures performing kin-work tasks “to regenerate families, maintain lifetime continuities, sustain intergenerational responsibilities, and reinforce shared values.” Figure 5.1 depicts this type of child-focused familial network in which various adults within and outside the immediate family have some type of obligation to a particular child. The boxes on the right represent separate households occupied by maternal kin, perhaps grandparents and an aunt, and then two of the mother’s supportive friends. On the left, the paternal grandparents and a close friend are shown to have ties to the focal child. For lots of actual families, the networks that define children’s lives are much more expansive than that shown in Figure 5.1.

In Figure 5.2, we shift the focus to the father to illustrate how constructing a network of supportive family members requires the father’s initiative and effort. When a mother and father are both faced with demands at the workplace, a married couple may turn to their in-laws for help in caring for children. A single custodial father may likewise seek support from compadres, or godparents, who could spend time with

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**Figure 5.1** Care Obligations in a Child-Focused Network

Source: Authors’ figure. 
Note: —— lines represent ties between adults and children. □ □ and □ boxes represent new households for the father and mother and, in this example, new partnerships as well. [], [] and [] boxes represent households of extended kin. Stick figures shaded the same color represent original family groups.
his daughter to allow him to exercise, go to church, or take a weekend trip. Figure 5.2 shows how the father is positioned in the network to manage relationships between the adults and child. In each case, the father plays a pivotal role in a system of coordinated and shared childcare responsibilities. The kin system can offer the father resources to help him forge his fatherly identity and, in some situations, secure involvement with his children. For example, a mother may encourage a nonresident father to attend birthday celebrations and holiday events to spend time with his children. Ultimately, someone has to take the initiative to coordinate child-care arrangements, and this is often no simple task. To do this well, attention must be given to family dynamics that take into consideration individuals’ personalities, sensibilities, and preferences.

How, exactly, do men help build and maintain a system of kin work in their extended families? In order to come together and agree on how to best nurture children in this large family group, fathers and family members must share expectations for behavior with each other. These
Figure 8.1  Collaborations Among Platforms to Promote Paternity Leave

- Limited scope of original paternity leave initiative with three platforms
- Federal mandate on paternity leave policy
- National media organization promoting “be with your baby” campaign
- Research organization evaluating effects of paternity leave policy on men’s involvement
- State consortiums of child support and workforce agencies
- Local grassroots fatherhood groups in multiple communities, with ties to families
- Community-based social service agencies to educate fathers on policy guidelines
- Enhanced scope of paternity leave initiative with buy-in from three additional platforms

Source: Authors’ figure.