

Center for Marriage and Families

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Protectors or Perpetrators?

Fathers, Mothers, and Child Abuse and Neglect

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Every year almost one million children in the United States are victims of child maltreatment. Maltreatment—defined as child neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or psychological maltreatment—poses serious threats to the welfare of children. Children who are abused and neglected are significantly more likely to suffer from depression, attachment disorders, academic failure, aggression, and promiscuity. Given the size, scope, and seriousness of the problem of child abuse and neglect, it is imperative that scholars, policymakers, journalists, and professionals have a thorough understanding of the family contexts of this social problem.

This brief explores what role fathers play in perpetrating or protecting their children from child neglect and abuse. The conventional wisdom—as articulated both in the popular culture and the media—holds that fathers are the main perpetrators of childhood abuse and neglect. Conventional wisdom, as this brief suggests, is not grounded in empirical research. In fact, except when it comes to the problem of sexual abuse, mothers are more likely to abuse or neglect their children than are fathers, largely because they spend more time caring for children than do fathers. Moreover, studies indicate that fathers, especially married fathers who live with their children, play an important role in protecting their children from abuse and neglect, a fact that is often overlooked by researchers, policymakers, and the media. This is not to say that fathers play no role in child abuse and neglect; research indicates that a little more than a third of maltreatment cases do involve fathers. Accordingly, this brief details the role that fathers play in protecting their children from or perpetrating child abuse and neglect, and it explores the social, emotional, and economic factors associated with paternal abuse and neglect.

Fathers, Mothers, and the Perpetration of Child Maltreatment

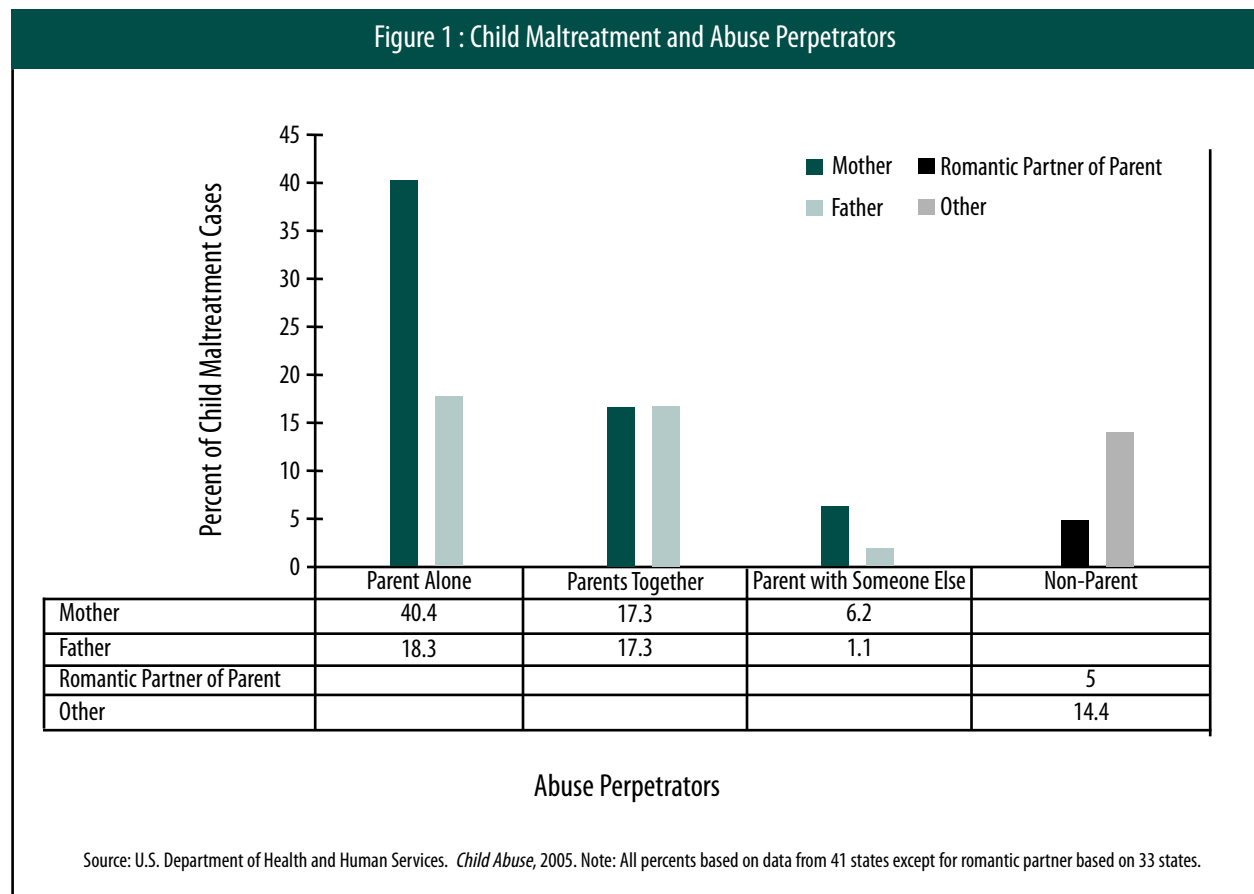
Child maltreatment in the United States is classified typically in the following four ways:

- Child neglect is a failure to provide for a child's basic needs for food, clothing, adult supervision, health care, education, and nurturing
- Physical abuse involves beating, punching, kicking, or shaking a child
- Sexual abuse refers to any sexual contact with a child or exposing a child to sexually explicit material or behavior
- Psychological maltreatment refers to behavior such as hectoring, corrupting, terrorizing, or withholding affection from a child

In 2005, 899,000 children were victims of abuse and neglect, according to reports from child protective service (CPS) agencies around the nation. Neglect was the most common form of maltreatment (62.8 percent of child victims), followed by physical abuse (26.6 percent), sexual abuse (9.3 percent), and psychological maltreatment (7.1 percent).¹

Mothers as Abusers

Mothers are almost twice as likely as fathers to be involved in child maltreatment. Compared to fathers, they also are more likely to abuse or neglect their children in every category of maltreatment except sexual abuse. As figure 1 indicates, federal data derived from CPS reports in 2005 indicate that mothers were involved in 64 percent of child maltreatment cases, whereas fathers (including stepfathers) were involved in 36.7 percent of such cases. In particular, fathers were the sole perpetrators in 18.3 percent of the cases, they acted with the mother in 17.3 percent of the cases, and they acted with someone else in 1.1 percent of the cases. In turn, mothers were the sole perpetrators in 40.4 percent of the cases and acted with someone besides the father in 6.2 percent of the cases. Romantic partners (usually men) made up 5 percent of all child abuse cases in the thirty-three states that reported such data. Mothers are more likely to neglect or abuse their children since they are the primary caregivers for children, especially in single-parent households, which are disproportionately involved in cases of neglect and abuse.²



Fathers as Abusers

Although children who live with their fathers are less likely to experience abuse and neglect than children who live apart from their fathers (see below), figure 1 shows that fathers are involved in slightly more than one-third of the maltreatment cases in the United States. Research indicates that a number of social, psychological, and family dynamics increase the odds that fathers will abuse or neglect their children.

First, fathers who are poor, unemployed, or underemployed are more likely to engage in maltreatment, compared to middle-class and upper-class fathers with good jobs. Fathers without an adequate income or job are more likely to be stressed, and stress increases the likelihood that fathers will become abusive. Underemployment or unemployment also can undercut a father's sense of self-worth, which also makes him more likely to resort to abusive behavior with his children.

Married fathers living with their children protect them from abuse and neglect.

Second, substance abuse is a central factor in paternal abuse and neglect. For instance, one study found that 66 percent of children who grew up in alcoholic homes were maltreated or witnessed domestic violence and more than 25 percent of these children were sexually abused.³ Among other things, alcohol and drug abuse lowers fathers' inhibitions to engage in violent or sexual behavior with their children, and it undermines their ability to provide proper care and supervision to their children.

Third, a range of psychological problems are also implicated in paternal maltreatment. As suggested above, fathers with a low sense of self-worth or who suffer from a high level of distress may engage in abusive behavior as a way to compensate for their feelings of powerlessness or to distract themselves from their own emotional difficulties. Fathers who were themselves abused as children, or who witnessed domestic violence as a child, also are more likely to resort to abuse as adults.

Finally, fathers who are not engaged in the lives of their children are more likely to engage in physical or sexual abuse. For instance, one study found that fathers who committed incest were much less likely to have engaged in caretaking responsibilities when their children were aged three or under. Apparently, fathers who do not engage in sufficient childcare when their children are young are less likely to develop a sense of competence as a father and are less likely to view their children as their own, both of which increase the likelihood that they engage in abusive behavior.⁴

Fathers' Economic Provision and Child Protection

In recent years, most research on fathers has focused on the important and distinctive role they play in nurturing their children, largely overlooking the ways in which fathers make important contributions to their children's welfare as providers and protectors.⁵ Nevertheless, research on child maltreatment clearly indicates that one way fathers play a protective role in the lives of their children is as economic providers.

Fathers' economic providership protects children from neglect and abuse in a variety of ways. First, because fathers who live with their children are much more likely to devote a substantial share of

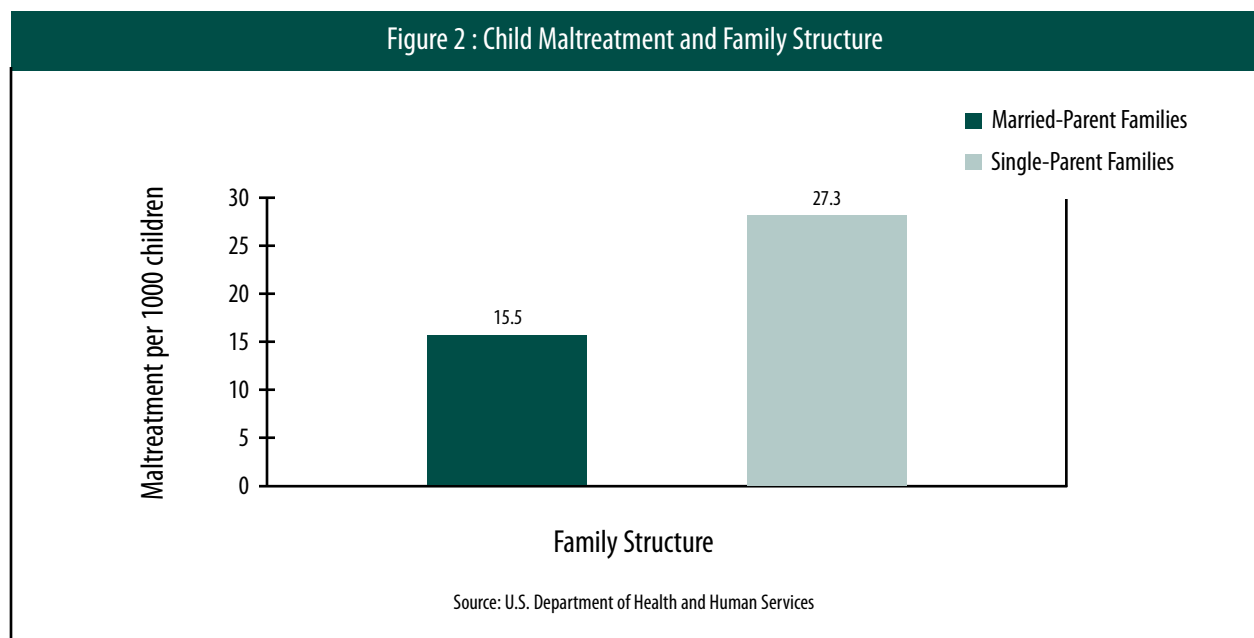
their income to their children than are nonresidential fathers, families with fathers present are much less likely to suffer from poverty. In turn, poverty is a key driver of abuse and neglect among America’s children. For instance, one study found that children in homes with incomes below \$15,000 were twenty-two to twenty-five times more likely to be abused and twenty-two times more likely to be severely injured by abuse, compared to children in families with incomes over \$30,000.⁶ Another study found that only 11 percent of children in married-couple households had ever lacked food at home or gone hungry, whereas 33 percent of children in single-mother households had lacked for food—a nearly 300 percent difference.⁷ Children whose non-resident fathers visited them frequently or paid regular child support were also 7 percentage points less likely to have lacked food at home or gone hungry.⁸

Fathers also facilitate their children’s access to health insurance/medical care through their employment efforts. In one study, children in married-couple households were twice as likely to be covered by employer-provided health care as were children in other family types.⁹ Even in situations in which they do not have access to employer-provided health care, families with fathers are more likely to purchase non-group health insurance policies than other families. Since health insurance is a strong predictor of access to adequate medical care, paternal provision can help children avoid medical neglect.

Finally, by economically providing for their children, fathers increase the odds that their children live in safer neighborhoods and attend safer schools. Studies indicate that children who live with their fathers are less likely to be the victim of or witness of a crime or physical assault.¹⁰

Married, Intact Families: The Safest Place for Children

On average, the safest place for children is living in an intact, married household with their father and mother. By contrast, children living outside of an intact, married family are more likely to suffer from neglect or abuse.



As figure 2 indicates, a 1996 federal study found that the overall rate of child maltreatment among single-parent households was nearly double that of two-parent families: 27.3 children per 1,000 were maltreated in single-parent families, whereas 15.5 children per 1,000 were maltreated in two-parent families.¹¹ Another study found that 7 percent of children who had lived with a single parent had been sexually abused, compared to 4 percent of children who had lived in an intact, biological family.¹² Still another study found that children were half as likely to suffer physical abuse involving a traumatic brain injury when they lived in a household with their father, compared to children living in a fatherless household.¹³

Research also indicates that children living in stepfamilies are more likely to suffer from abuse. One study by David Finkelhor of the University of New Hampshire and his colleagues found that “children currently living in single parent and stepfamilies had significantly greater lifetime exposure than those living with two biological or adoptive parents” to five different forms of victimization—sexual assault, child maltreatment, assault by peers or siblings, being a victim of a crime, or witnessing violence.¹⁴ Other studies have found that children are markedly more likely to be killed or sexually abused by stepfathers, compared to children living in an intact, married household.

**Children in
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tions are more
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Unrelated Males in Caretaking Roles: A Particular Danger to Children

Children living in cohabiting households with unrelated males, as well as children being cared for by their mother’s boyfriend, are especially vulnerable to maltreatment. Studies consistently find that unrelated males who are placed in a caretaking role with children are disproportionately involved in the physical and sexual abuse of children. For instance, one study of child fatalities in Missouri found that preschool children who lived in a cohabiting household with an unrelated male were nearly fifty times more likely to be killed than children living in a home with both biological parents.¹⁵ Another study found that although boyfriends contribute less than 2 percent of nonparental care, they are responsible for half of all reported child abuse by nonparents.¹⁶ Researchers Patricia Schnitzer and Bernard Ewigman concluded that such cohabiting households put children at a “dramatically higher risk” of abuse.¹⁷

Why are children in intact families safer than children in other family situations? Compared to single mothers living alone, mothers living in a married household are less likely to be abusive or neglectful of their children because they enjoy more support from a spouse.

Fathers help mothers be better parents in a variety of ways. First, fathers can directly care for their children, thereby providing mothers with a break from the challenges and stresses of parenting. Second, by engaging in housework or other tasks associated with running a household, fathers can help decrease mothers’ stress, thereby lowering the risk of child maltreatment. Third, fathers can monitor a mother’s parenting, stepping in when she could be on the verge of engaging in abusive or neglectful parenting. Finally, married fathers can offer emotional support and advice to their wives, and both parents can strategize together about parenting. Such support is invaluable in reducing the odds that a mother ends up abusing her children. For all these reasons, then,

mothers who are married to the father of their children are less likely to neglect or abuse their children, compared to single mothers.

Children living in a cohabiting relationship or in a stepfamily are vulnerable to abuse for different reasons. Children born into a cohabiting relationship are much more likely to see their parents break up than are children born into married families. Consequently, compared to children born into married families, they are much more likely to live in a single-parent household before they reach age 18 and to experience family instability, both of which increase their odds of suffering from neglect. Although mothers often gain a measure of financial and emotional support from men who are unrelated to their children, be they cohabiting boyfriends or stepfathers, their children face an increased likelihood of physical and sexual abuse from these men.¹⁸ Men who are not related by biology or by adoption (soon after birth) to the children in their care are more likely to have difficulty controlling their anger when children misbehave or reining in any sexual attraction that they might have toward the children. Accordingly, stepfathers and boyfriends are more likely to engage in abusive behavior toward their stepchildren or toward the children of their girlfriend.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Although fathers are involved in slightly more than one-third of the substantiated cases of child maltreatment, children who grow up in an intact, married household with their fathers are significantly less likely overall to experience neglect or abuse than are children who spend some time apart from their fathers. Children in father-present homes are on average safer because they are more likely to benefit financially from their fathers' providership, their mothers are more likely to enjoy the social and emotional support of a coparent, and their biological or adoptive fathers are less likely than stepfathers or other unrelated males to physically or sexually abuse them. In short, children are safest when they live in a married home with a biological or adoptive father who is committed to their welfare and to the welfare of their mother.

The evidence presented in this brief suggests that policymakers, social service professionals, journalists, and family scholars should take five steps to increase the safety of U.S. children:

1. They should investigate and support programs that successfully help couples with children, especially low-income couples who are more likely to have children outside marriage, get and stay happily married.
2. They should devise policies and programs that help fathers get and keep decent-paying jobs. Gainful employment helps fathers protect their children from neglect and reduces the likelihood that they will engage in abusive behavior toward their children.
3. State legislatures should resist initiatives—such as the one recently proposed by the prestigious American Law Institute—that would seek to grant custody rights to adults who are unrelated to children simply because they have lived for some time with the child and parent. This brief shows that such adults are more likely to pose threats to children than are biological or adoptive parents.
4. Parents should be strongly encouraged to take greater care when placing children in the care of unrelated male adults—especially boyfriends; too often such men may not be suitable caregivers.
5. Public and private organizations should launch a public health campaign to alert the public to the central role that active and affectionate fathers play in protecting their children from neglect and abuse.

Taken together, these measures could markedly reduce the scourge of child abuse and neglect in the United States.

Endnotes

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National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) was founded in 1994 to confront the most consequential social problem of our time: the widespread absence of fathers from children’s lives. NFI’s mission is to improve the well-being of children by increasing the proportion of children growing up with involved, responsible, and committed fathers in their lives. NFI accomplishes this mission through educating and inspiring all people, especially fathers; equipping and developing leaders; and engaging every sector of society.

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