

MODULE EIGHT: AN OVERVIEW OF CHILD SUPPORT

Learning Objectives:

- Explain the federal child support assistance programs
- Explain the relationship between paying child support in general and positive child outcomes
- Describe the process of child support orders
- Identify barriers and strategies to involve fathers in child support programs
- Describe the role of New York City Office of Child Support Services

Time: 2 hours

Materials:

Digital Story:

Coley: <https://youtu.be/mxKgdw6zo5U>

PowerPoint

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Recommended Textbook:

Cabrera, N.J., & Tamis-LeMonda, C.S. (Eds.). (2013). *Handbook of father involvement: Multidisciplinary perspectives 2nd Edition*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Supplemental Resource:

Mazza, C., & Perry, A.R. (Eds.). (2017). *Fatherhood in America: Social work perspectives on a changing society*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.

Readings:

New York City Human Resources Administration. (2015). *Office of Child Support Enforcement annual report: 2015*. New York, NY.

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https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/hra/downloads/pdf/services/child_support/ocse_annual_report.pdf

	<p>Sorensen, E. (2016). <i>The story behind the numbers: The child support program is a good investment</i>. Office of Child Support Enforcement, Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/programs/css/sbtn_csp_is_a_good_investment.pdf</p>
<p>Small Group Discussion</p>	<p>Divide class into small groups and use their reflections on the readings to discuss the following question:</p> <p>What are some different perceptions of child support?</p> <p>Allow time for students to share and discuss their responses with their peers. Have each group share a few of their responses with the class.</p>
<p>Historical Perspective on Child Support</p>	<p>Introduce and set context for this module by citing statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau:</p> <p>According to the most recent data from the U.S. Census Bureau (Grall, 2016):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is estimated that 13.4 million parents lived with 22.1 million children under 21 years of age while the other parent(s) lived elsewhere. • Of all children under the age of 21 years, more than a quarter (26.6 percent) lived in families with only one of their parents while the other parent lived elsewhere. • The proportion of custodial mothers with income below poverty (31.2 percent) was nearly two times higher than that of custodial fathers (17.4 percent). • Child support income accounted for over two-thirds (70.3 percent) of the mean annual personal income for custodial parents below poverty who received full child support. • About half (48.7 percent) of all custodial parents had either legal or informal child support agreements, and custodial mothers were more likely to have agreements (52.3 percent) than custodial fathers (31.4 percent). <p>The poverty rate for single parent households is greater than it is for two parent households. In 2015, 35 percent of single-parent families</p>

had incomes below the poverty line, compared with 8 percent of married couples with children (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2017).

Parents can support their children financially in a number of different ways, including:

- *Formal cash support:* provided through a formal child support order, which may or may not be addressed through the federal child support program.
- *Informal cash support:* any financial contribution outside of a formal order.
- *In-kind support:* any noncash good or service that is directly provided (e.g. food, clothes, toys, medicines, school supplies, etc.)

As a formal federal program, child support has become increasingly important in the lives of impoverished families over the last forty years and now functions as a massive, cost-effective anti-poverty program and major tool used by policy makers. In FY2015, the child support program served nearly 16 million children and collected \$28.6b for cases receiving child support services (Sorensen, 2016).

Though the child support program is federally mandated, child support laws and administrative processes vary from state to state. In New York, like in many other states, parents can pay formal, court-ordered child support that does not have to involve the federal Child Support Enforcement (CSE) program; in New York State, payments made under these terms are called “private” payments. In this context, however, “child support” refers to the federal program unless otherwise noted.

When the federal child support program was created in 1975 its initial purpose was to recover the welfare costs associated with the federal welfare program, and even today many people enter the federal child support program because they are required to as part of the process of receiving cash benefits. Over the years the goals of the program have expanded to include helping to secure financial support for children from noncustodial parents, increasing the economic security of families, and further enabling nonresident parents to contribute to childrearing

costs through child support payments. Today, the focus of the program has shifted to a “family- centered service delivery model” (OCSS, 2011), providing a broader range of services and assistance on behalf of children such as:

1. locating absent parents
2. establishing paternity
3. establishing child support orders
4. reviewing and modifying child support orders
5. collecting child support payments
6. distributing child support payments
7. establishing and enforcing support for children’s medical needs
8. reducing government debt
9. connecting NCPs to employment

Based on the Sorensen (2016) article, pose the following question to the class:

Over the last decade, how has the relationship between TANF and child support changed in serving children and custodial parents?

The CSE program, while one of the broadest reaching federal programs and a leading anti-poverty program, is still confronted with challenges in the face of:

- changes in family structures and circumstances
- economic shifts that create challenges for wage earners and in some cases complicate standard enforcement methods, principally income execution
- rising incarceration rates (which erode parents’ abilities to earn enough money to support their children and make child support order compliance difficult)

Ultimately, the child support program is a two-generation program. In addition to improving financial resources in the custodial household, the program can strengthen relationships between noncustodial parents and their children by helping both parents stabilize their lives and reinforcing their identity as parents and co-parents (Sorensen, 2016). This, in turn, can lead to long-lasting benefits for children.

Group Discussion

Pose the following questions to the class:

- What do you think are some benefits of child support?
- What are some negative unintended consequences of child support in low-income communities?

Share the following (Sorensen, 2016):

Some benefits of child support:

- Reduces child poverty
- Increases economic independence
- Increases work and quality of work among single mothers
- Benefits children's educational outcomes
- Reduces the risk of child maltreatment. It is widely recognized that children living in families with limited economic resources are at higher risk for maltreatment than children from higher socioeconomic strata. A recent study reported that mothers who received child support were 10 percent less likely to have a "screened-in maltreatment report" than mothers who did not receive child support
- Increases parental involvement among nonresident parents
- Reduces nonmarital births and divorce

Some unintended negative consequences:

- Can increase poverty among some nonresident parents
- Welfare cost recovery discourages child support payments and encourages work in the underground economy
- High orders and excessive debt discourage child support payments and formal employment

Note: Despite these potential negative consequences, it is important for social workers, community-based organizations and government entities to engage the noncustodial parent. There are programs and laws in place to protect low-income noncustodial parents. Connecting them to the child support program can thus help them avoid debt while still supporting their child.

In some relationships, child support enforcement can escalate or exacerbate domestic violence/intimate partner violence. However, it may also reduce parental conflict because it increases the likelihood and amount of child support paid.

Child Support and Positive Child

Economic hardship and poverty are likely detrimental to children's development. However, with higher levels of economic resources and greater financial support, families can be affected in various ways

Outcomes

(Nepomnyaschy, Magnuson, & Berger, 2012):

- Parents may be able to purchase important goods and services that contribute to children's healthy development (e.g. higher quality child care, better housing and schools, and enriching activities and lessons)
- Possible reduction of custodial parents' economic hardship and improvement of their mental health (reductions in psychological distress may result in higher quality parenting, e.g. more nurturance and less harsh discipline)
- Potential increase or improvement in fathers' non-pecuniary involvement with their children (financial support is often closely related to other types of father involvement)

The U.S. Census Bureau found that in 2014, over 500,000 children were lifted out of poverty due to child support payments (First Focus, 2015). On average for low-income families, a significant portion of household family income consists of child support for those who are receiving it.

The impact of fathers' financial investments is thought to increase the quality of their children's home experiences and potentially "lifting" those at risk for socioeconomic disadvantage above the poverty line. A recent study from the National Bureau of Economic Research found improved children's behavioral and emotional problems associated with increased cash income.

There is evidence that supports a strong link between child support income and child well-being and development that makes it distinct from (and perhaps even more efficacious than) other sources of income. Research shows that payments of child support:

- Reduce child poverty
- Promote parental responsibility and involvement (e.g. parents who make regular child support payments have more interaction with their children)
- Are positively related to measures of child well-being, such as cognitive skills, emotional development, and educational attainment

Process of Child Support Orders

A child support order dictates the amount of the financial obligation and how it should be paid. Every child support order is required to include a provision for healthcare coverage.

In New York State, the process of obtaining child support orders involves:

- **Opening a case.** While a majority of custodial parents are mothers, it is important to emphasize that fathers, or in some cases guardians, may have primary custody of the children.
- **Locating the noncustodial parent**
- **Identifying a legal father** (known as establishing paternity). This can be done administratively in a hospital or a child support office by signing an Acknowledgement of Paternity Form (AOP) or during a court hearing. It can also be established through the court by default if a man does not appear at a paternity hearing, but was properly served notice. Establishment of paternity can take place up to the child(ren)'s 21st birthday. Typically, if a case is brought to court, action won't be initiated if the child is aged 20.5 years or older.

After paternity is established, fathers gain the ability to seek court-ordered visitation or custody and have a say in situations related to the child, such as adoption or medical issues. Children gain a broad spectrum of legal rights and privileges, including rights to:

- Inheritance
- The father's medical and life insurance benefits
- Social Security survivor benefits
- Possible veterans' benefits

- **Establishing a support order**
- **Collecting support.** The default collection process is through automatic withholding from earnings of the noncustodial parent, which is sent by the employer to a centralized processing center.

Barriers in Child Support Programs

Child support programs are in a unique position to assist a large percentage of low-income families. In order to promote the well-being of children, youth, and families, engaging fathers in the child support

process is essential.

According to Nepomnyaschy, Magnuson, and Berger (2010), estimates from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) suggest that among children born to unmarried parents, only 20 percent of nonresident fathers make formal child support payments by the time the focal child is 3 years old. However, nearly 40 percent provide informal support.

One conclusion that the FFCWS reaches is that “despite their high hopes, most parental relationships do not last, and as a result many children experience high levels of instability.” Five years after the birth of their child, only 35 percent of the unmarried couples were living together, and less than half of that group were married (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2014).

Pose the following to the class:

From the mother’s perspective, what are some reasons she might not pursue formalized child support?

Possible responses:

- Lack of information and understanding of the program
- Distrust of government programs
- Belief that bringing the noncustodial parent to court may stop any informal support (financial and emotional) that he or she is providing

The circumstances of low-income, noncustodial fathers may create barriers to fulfilling child support payments, some of which include:

- High rates of joblessness
- Scarce resources
- Low-wage jobs or irregular employment
- High prevalence of multiple- partner fertility (this makes it particularly difficult to meet obligations to children and families in more than one household)
- Unrealistically high child support order amounts

Specialized Populations

- Preference of informal support to formal support
- Education
- Conflict with custodial parent

As we have discussed, federal child support programs around the country have moved to broaden their services to connect noncustodial parents with jobs.

Furthermore, special populations such as mixed-status families (in which at least one parent is a noncitizen and at least one child is a citizen) and criminal justice-involved fathers provides greater complexity in engagement around child support.

For children with incarcerated parents, there is a loss of primary source of financial support- both formal and informal. Formerly incarcerated parents owing child support face challenges to steady employment due to the combination of felony convictions and limited education, job skills, and job openings.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Child Support Enforcement (2015), outlines some strategies for working with fathers, particularly those who are incarcerated:

- Reach out to parents in federal and state prisons and jails
- Take affirmative steps to reduce child support orders commensurate with the parent’s loss of income and inability to work
- Provide tools for parents to communicate with the child support program during incarceration
- Work with community partners to help children maintain contact with their incarcerated parent
- Stop the clock on accrual of uncollectible debt
- Provide targeted post-prison child support services, partnering with reentry, fatherhood and employment programs, and helping parents manage child support debt after prison. Opportunities for child support agencies to get involved include pre-sentence orientations, facility visits, modification, debt compromise, and connection to job services and other supports

Addressing Barriers

<p>Small Group Discussion – Digital Story Coley</p>	<p>One way that the federal child support program has changed to address some of the barriers we have discussed is to put into place rules that (Administration for Children & Families, 2016):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set accurate support orders based on the specific case facts. This should help with unrealistic child support orders • Prevent states from treating incarceration as “voluntary unemployment” and require them to proactively advise non-custodial parents of their rights to have their orders modified. This should help reduce the debts built up by incarcerated non-custodial parents • Require states to have a self-support reserve <p>Show Coley’s digital story. Divide the class back into small groups. Ask them to think about Coley’s story and answer the following question:</p> <p><i>How would you begin to engage Coley in a discussion about child support?</i></p> <p>Have each group share their responses with the class, highlighting similar and different responses across groups.</p>
<p>New York City Office of Child Support Services (NYC OCSS)</p>	<p>New York City’s Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) plays an important role in helping to promote the well-being of children, youth, and families.</p> <p>Discuss the role and mission of OCSS:</p> <p><i>The Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) is part of the New York City Human Resources Administration (HRA), an agency of the City of New York. OCSS’s mission is to put children first by helping parents provide for the economic and social well-being, health, and stability of their children.</i></p> <p>OCSE’s provision of services are extended to all parents, both custodial and noncustodial, regardless of income or immigration status.</p> <p>Custodial parents (i.e. parents living with and caring for their children) may receive support with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Locating the noncustodial parent (i.e. the parent living outside

the household)

- Establishing legal fatherhood (paternity)
- Establishing child support and medical support orders
- Collecting and distributing support payments
- Enforcement of child support orders

OCSS also assists noncustodial parents by offering programs to help them meet their child support obligations and manage their child support cases. Services include assistance with:

- Lowering or even eliminating child support debt owed to the government
- Changing (i.e., modifying) an existing child support order
- Finding a job
- Diversifying and modernizing the ways that parents can pay child support by offering online payments options, as well as the option to use credit cards and cash-based money transfer services (e.g. MoneyGram)
- Resolving enforcement-related issues through the creation of a payment agreement or other mechanisms

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