PART 2
Expectations of Others

The world of live-away fathers goes beyond the primary links that exist between themselves and their children. Daily living leads fathers to interact with various individuals and groups, some of whom may directly or indirectly affect their fatherhood. Fathers may have intimate relationships with women other than their children’s mother. They have friendships and work relationships that bind some of their leisure time and energy. They have kin networks from whom they may receive and provide guidance and different types of support. The nature and content of these many relationships and interactions may affect fathers’ attitudes about parenting and what they actually do in this capacity. For example, a father’s environment is extended whenever he moves into a new setting, such as a marriage, remarriage, or intimate relationship, a new place of work, or enrolls in classes to improve his skills and education. Interaction may take various forms, and others in these settings may participate in fathers’ relationships with their children. Additionally, formal and informal communication may occur among settings, and knowledge and attitudes may exist in one setting about another.

The extent of men’s day-to-day involvement with children, what they provide, and how often they interact must be understood in context of these interconnections. Whether or not a father visits his live-away children every Monday or Tuesday, or only once a month, is interconnected with his responsibilities, activities, and experiences in other aspects of his daily life. For example, fathers’ balance of home life and live-away family, work schedules and type of occupation, dating patterns and recreational activities, all may impact upon what he does or does not do with his live-away children. All of this, too, is negotiated within a poor to working-class existence, where fathers must organize all of the above within significant financial and social constraints. The extent to which some live-away fathers visit with their children, attend their ball games or school plays, take them to the movies or to the doctor, or simply sit around and talk, must be balanced with other aspects of their daily lives. The number of hours they work, the degree of physical and emotional labor required on the job, physical distance from children, and financial constraints may impact how they negotiate their time as fathers.

Added to this possibility, research also suggests that within live-away fathers’ worlds the attitudes and behaviors of their current partners affect
their fathering. Cohabitation and marriage—due to the complexity and constraints of balancing time between families—may decrease fathers’ involvement with their children. Seltzer and Brandreth (1994) found that relative to fathers who remained single following divorce, those who remarried or cohabited discovered managing time for their children proved more difficult. Relative to those who did not live with children, remarried or cohabiting noncustodial fathers who lived with other biological children or stepchildren were more involved with their noncustodial children and more positive about their fatherhood. Though these findings are specific to divorced men, they may nevertheless offer some explanation for never-married fathers—particularly those who at one time resided with the mothers of their children.

Most significant in influencing men’s participation in their children’s lives is their relationship with the mothers of their children. Kurdek (1983) found that relative to those with congenial relationships with the mothers of their children, fathers experiencing antagonistic relationships were likely to have little to no contact with their children. Noncustodial fathers maintaining a good relationship with the mother of their children were more likely to remain in contact with their children.

There is also some indication that custodial mothers may inhibit or enhance the role of fathers in the lives of their children. They may do this by monitoring the time men spend with their children and controlling children’s availability and accessibility. In other words, they may act as “gatekeepers,” regulating when fathers visit, choosing not to inform them of the dates and times of children’s extracurricular activities, or insuring that the children are too busy to visit Dad. Regardless, many single parenting women say that live-away fathers do not spend enough time with their children and that they would like for their children’s fathers to participate more in the everyday lives of their offspring.1

While the above studies tend to primarily focus on white middle-class divorced couples, black adolescent single mothers seem to share their sentiment. They, too, say fathers do not spend enough time with their children and would like to see them doing much more.

Part 2 explores the roles of significant others in contributing to men’s paternal attitudes and behaviors. In chapter 4, men discuss what they think others, particularly the mothers of their children, expect of them as fathers. Chapter 5 explores how custodial mothers, and children of noncustodial fathers perceive paternal responsibilities.