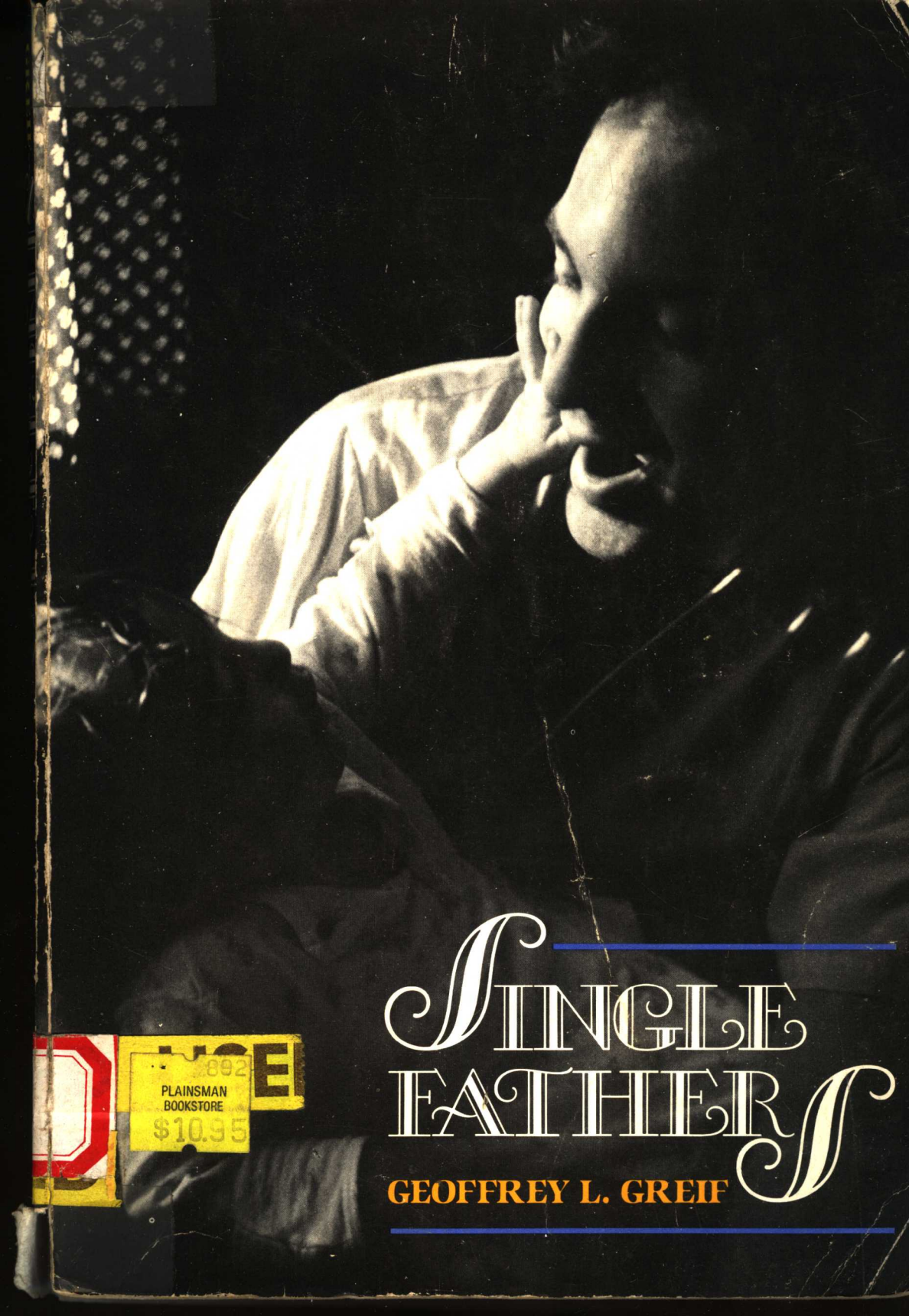
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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book began as a doctoral dissertation while I was attending the Columbia University School of Social Work in New York and commuting by train from my home in Philadelphia. During those days I became very familiar with that section of the rail system. The bulk of the book was rewritten in its current form in Philadelphia after I had finished school. Oddly enough, it was completed on another part of the rail system—the run from Philadelphia to Baltimore, where I have been teaching at the University of Maryland School of Social Work and Community Planning. I considered dedicating the book to Amtrak, but thought better of it.

I have been interested in men's issues (people's issues?) since the early 1970s. My master's thesis dealt with men's consciousness-raising groups. The study of single fathers came later, as an outgrowth of my continued interest in men's roles and of my sharing with my wife, Maureen, the child rearing of our oldest daughter, Jennifer.

A few points need to be made. This book deals primarily with single fathers because their story needs to be told. A research project on mothers without custody, an equally important side of the coin, is now being completed. As will be shown in this book, these mothers are an important and misunderstood population. What they experience at the hands of society is harmful both to them and to the fathers described here.

A number of tables, as well as a detailed description of the methodology and limitations of the study, appear in the appendix. This information has been provided for those wishing to know more about the study and the fathers who completed the questionnaire. All names and other identifying information have been changed to protect confidentiality.

Finally, I have tried to write the book so it will be useful to two audiences—those who study, work, and teach in fields that deal with family relations, and those who, though not professionally involved, have a personal interest in or curiosity about fathers raising children alone.

Acknowledgments

There are many people to thank. The original study was funded by two foundations that wish to remain anonymous, but the people who make up these foundations should know I am eternally grateful to them for a number of reasons, the least of which has been the financial support they have given.

Ann Parks and Ginnie Nuta, at Parents Without Partners and *The Single Parent,* have aided me considerably since 1981. Lee Robeson, Hoyt Walbridge, and Jim Conroy have provided statistical support in dealing with the data. The students I have taught at the University of Maryland, Cabrini College, and Widener University have helped me by showing interest and enthusiasm along the way. As always, there was a great deal of typing and retyping. Rita Bell cheerfully accepted this task and made it more pleasant, as Essie Bailey had done with an earlier version. Brenda Frank needs to be thanked for her editorial comments, as does Carol Meyer for influencing a great deal of my thinking about social work and teaching.

Kathy Wasserman, who co-wrote chapter 11, displayed interviewing skills and insight into the children that made the chapter a pleasure to complete.

I have also been assisted on a variety of levels by the other researchers from whose work I have borrowed in writing this book. Wallerstein and Kelly's work has been particularly helpful. I hope I have given them all sufficient credit for influencing my thinking.

Perhaps most important, I have been helped by the single fathers who took part in the survey and the fathers whose homes I visited and whose children I interviewed. They were always willing to do whatever they could to assist me and to help other single fathers. Special thanks must be given to the family who were interviewed for chapter 2. Their openness made the work much easier.

Finally, to the three people who help me to be a father—Maureen, Jennifer, and Alissa—this book is dedicated. (Did I have a choice? No, there was no other choice!)

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1
Introduction

Allen came home one day and found that his wife had run off with one of his friends. He was left with the house and two children. Allen had known things were shaky in the marriage, but he had not expected this. Suddenly he was left with a number of brewing crises. He had to decide what to tell the children. He had to go to work and arrange for child care. He had to figure out how to do the housework, handle the laundry, and prepare meals. Finally, he had to sort things out for himself. There were many things about his failed marriage he did not understand. Three months later, Allen's wife returned. Her new relationship had fallen apart, and she wanted the children and the house. Allen said no, and they went to court. The judge thought the children were better off staying where they were: Allen won.

Mario and his wife had not been getting along for years but had stayed together for financial reasons. When Mario was passed over for a promotion, relations between them deteriorated. They started fighting more and more. Sometimes the children would get involved in their fights. Mario had become more involved in parenting because his wife was spending time away from the house, job hunting. The morning after a particularly bad fight, they decided to split up. They both wanted the children. Mario wanted them because he loved them and believed he could raise them alone; however, he agreed to move out, and his wife took over the responsibility. A few months later, when she became unhappy with the situation, she moved out, and Mario moved back into the house with the children. He has been raising them alone ever since.

Frank and his wife had slowly grown apart during their ten years of marriage. They had married when they were both young and still in college. His wife thought she had given up a lot to be a wife and mother. Now that their child was older, she felt less needed at home. She wanted to be something other than a housewife. Frank was settled in a decent-paying job, and she was looking for employment. When they split up, letting Frank raise their child seemed the natural decision. He had a more stable income and more regular work hours, and she would be better able to find work if she was not strapped with child care.

This book is about single fathers who are raising children following the breakup of their marriages—fathers whose situations very nearly fit those of

Allen, Mario, or Frank, and other fathers whose experiences are very different. What they all have in common is that they are raising children without the children's mother living in their home. (Widowers have been excluded because of the focus here on the continuing relationship with the noncustodial mothers.) These fathers are living a nontraditional life-style that is rare but becoming increasingly common. Not much is known about these men. Yet how they manage raising their children has far-reaching implications for our view of fathers and mothers.

The roles of fathers and mothers, men and women, are a mirror of our lives. Our reactions to people who occupy nontraditional roles say as much about us as about the people we are observing. What we think about fathers with custody is an indication of how far we have come in understanding ourselves. It is the contention of this book that we do not know enough about fathers who have custody. We form conclusions about them that are often incorrect. We base assumptions about them on information—often fallacious—that we get from movies, books, newspaper articles, television, and our own views of the way men and women should behave. We construct myths about these fathers.

Because of these myths, we take a dichotomous view of the single father that, by implication, is restraining and demeaning to both fathers and mothers. This dichotomous view is built on two assumptions. On the one hand, we assume the father is an extraordinary man simply because he is raising his children. On the other, we assume he needs our help with cooking, cleaning, and child rearing because he had not had much experience with those chores.

The first assumption is an outgrowth of our heritage. Throughout most of the twentieth century, mothers have been the primary caretakers of children. They have taken care of the children in the home and have run households. They have been the nurturers. In the words of Talcott Parsons, they have fulfilled an "expressive" function. The fathers, fulfilling an "instrumental" function, have served as the guide to the outside world.[1] They have worked in that world and have supported the family financially. They have negotiated for the family with the world and educated the children about how to be successful when they leave home. More recently, however, with mothers entering the work force and more men taking part in housework, this concept, formed in the 1950s, has become obsolete. The roles of the mother and the father do not fit neatly into Parsons's framework.[2] We see men in greater numbers than ever before changing diapers, taking their children to the park, and generally nurturing them. Yet the obsolescence of the Parsonian conceptualization should not be seen as proof that there is now equality in our expectations of the sexes. There is not. Even though mothers work outside the house, they are not as well represented in the work force as men are. The man is still the primary and, in many cases, the sole wage earner. In only 11

percent of working couples does the woman earn a higher income than the man.[3] According to the Census Bureau, women entering the work force earn less than men entering it.[4] At home, by contrast, the mother is still the executive. Although fathers are doing more around the house, in terms of both housework and child rearing, many of these duties are not shared equally. The mother still carries the major responsibility. Yes, there has been a sexual revolution, but, no, there has not been a *coup d'etat*. Men and women are still carrying out fundamentally traditional behavior.

When a father has custody, people assume he is an extraordinary man. They think he must be incredibly dedicated to his children, and they believe his children must be dedicated to him. They wonder how he can do all the things he has to do: work, run the house, cook, take care of the children. Socially, he is often seen as a good catch, especially to the single mother, because he is good father material.

At the same time, dichotomously, he is seen as someone who needs help. How can he know how to cook, clean, and shop for clothes for his children? How can he know how to discuss sexuality with an adolescent daughter? People feel sorry for him and run to his aid. They feel sorry for his children. They offer him assistance in the form of recipes and lectures on hair braiding. They say to him in the same breath, "You're great," and "Let me help you."

These reactions to single fathers are based on myth and on tradition. The goal of this book is to discuss what 1,136 fathers have gone through in raising their children. By learning how these men handle the demands of single parenthood, we can gain a more accurate picture of single fathers, of single mothers both with and without custody, and of role expectations for men and women. These men are in a crucible. Because they are on the fringe of society, they provide a way for us to look at how role expectations are carried out, how men get along without role models, and how we feel about fathers doing what mothers have traditionally done.

The Single-Father Phenomenon

In 1983 there were almost 600,000 divorced and separated single fathers raising children under eighteen years old—an increase of 180 percent since 1970. During the same period, the percentage of divorced and separated single mothers increased by slightly over 105 percent, to 4,256,000.[5] By 1983 these fathers were raising almost 1 million children,[6] a number that continues to grow. Many theorists believe both the number and the percentage of single fathers will continue to climb during the 1980s. There has also been a sharp rise in joint custodial arrangements. Although the statistics on sole custodians can be documented, the statistics on parents who are sharing custody cannot. The Census Bureau has no category for fathers or mothers

who have their children on weekends or half the time. A parent is categorized as either having children in the home or not. As a result, no one is sure to what extent joint custodial arrangements have become more common, although clearly their growth has been significant.

What we are seeing is part of a trend toward greater involvement by fathers in both divorced and intact families. The increase in men's involvement in parenting roles has been attributed to a number of factors. The first of these is the women's movement. Starting in the early 1960s, and inspired in part by the civil rights movement and the publication of books on feminism by Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan, and others, the movement and its proponents have sought equality in every facet of American life. The impact of the women's movement has been felt in the workplace, the armed forces, elective and appointed political offices, and our personal lives. Both Sandra Day O'Connor and Geraldine Ferraro represent political choices made by men seeking women's votes. In the home, the women's movement has contributed to greater paternal involvement to fill the vacuum left by women entering the work force. For children, this has meant having less contact with their mothers, spending more time in alternative child-care situations, perhaps being left alone. Sometimes, too, it has meant more time with their fathers.

The women's movement as an isolated factor has not caused these changes, however. Since the early 1960s those adults who are now parents have witnessed many changes—a popular musical revolution; the growth of a middle-class drug culture; great affluence and technological advances; and political disillusionment brought on by the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal. In this context, the women's movement can be seen as one of many important factors that helped pave the way for profound changes in the life-style of many Americans.

The upshot of these changes is that men and women have more options for behavior than ever before. Women have increased job opportunities. In 1970 only 37 percent of children under eighteen had a mother in the work force. In 1984 that figure had increased to over 50 percent.[7] Because of these changes, women are better able to define themselves in nonmaternal ways; they can be successful at something other than motherhood. Fathers also have more options. Men have joined consciousness-raising groups; have become househusbands; and have become more involved in the diapering, feeding, and bathing of babies. Whether or not these changes for men and women are short-lived and will be reversed remains to be seen. For now, the result has been increased avenues for individual expression and fulfillment.

With these changes have come others as well. There is a greater blurring of sex roles. Men have more leisure time. With their wives working, they can work shorter hours and still have the family's income remain stable. With increased free time, men can become more involved with their families.

There is also a subtle change in the way men view themselves. We have become a more open society, more willing to examine our feelings. Many

men have thought about their own childhood and concluded they missed something when they were growing up because their father either was not home as a result of a demanding work schedule, or was distant when he was home. Fathers want to give their children a different experience, and they want a different parenting experience for themselves than their own fathers had. This is part of the makeup of what has sometimes been described as the new man, the softer male who is less macho. He reportedly understands women and their needs. He is interested in a sharing relationship with a woman that is not constrained by traditional roles.

This new man image that has emerged in the last ten years can be found portrayed in television shows and the movies. A look at the Academy Awards over the past several years shows that the new man as actor or as a theme has been consistently winning the Oscars. The following table shows the winners in two key categories since 1977. An asterisk indicates the winner that reflects this new trend. Prior to 1977, awards usually went to movies that expressed other themes or to actors who embodied a macho image.

	Best Movie	*Best Actor*
1977	**Annie Hall* with Woody Allen in his typical nonmacho role	*Richard Dreyfuss as good father material in *Goodbye Girl.*
1978	[*The Deer Hunter*]	*John Voight plays a soft, warm Vietnam veteran in *Coming Home.*
1979	**Kramer vs. Kramer*	*Dustin Hoffman immortalizes single fathering.
1980	**Ordinary People,* where father and son find each other.	[Robert DeNiro]
1981	[*Chariots of Fire*]	*Henry Fonda as grandfather working out issues with daughter and grandson.
1982	**Gandhi* for the man and the epic film	*Ben Kingsley as Gandhi.
1983	[*Terms of Endearment*]	*Robert Duvall as a drunken soft-hearted father in *Tender Mercies.*

Whether this trend continues remains to be seen. But certainly these awards reflect a shift in the images we have of men.

The second reason for the increase in paternal involvement is the high divorce rate—a phenomenon that has been linked to the first reason, the women's movement. Between 1970 and 1982 the rate of divorce rose from 47 divorced persons per 1,000 married persons to 114 per 1,000.[8] Although the

divorce rate leveled off in 1982 for the first time in many years, the high rate of divorce means there are still numerous opportunities for men to be sole parents. With every divorce involving children, there is a chance that a father will become the sole custodian of his children. Many fathers do not want to lose their family. They are willing to go to great lengths to get custody because their children are vitally important to them.

The third reason for greater involvement in single parenting by fathers has to do with the legal changes that have evolved because of the women's movement and other social changes. Fathers now have a better chance of gaining custody in court in disputed cases. Yet although fathers' chances are clearly better, there is a heated debate between feminists and fathers' rights groups as to whether there is equality between the sexes when there is a court battle. Feminists claim the father now has the upper hand; fathers' groups argue that mothers are still favored. To understand the nature of this battle, a brief history of custody decisions is needed.

Custody in Perspective

Prior to the twentieth century, a father was much more likely than a mother to be a single parent raising children alone, for two reasons. First, the high maternal mortality rate plunged many fathers, especially in rural areas, into widowhood.[9] Second, fathers had social status, whereas mothers—and women in general—had none. Mothers were rarely granted custody in cases of divorce because they had little chance of supporting themselves independently. Women who had worked on the farm or at home, once separated from their husband, had no salable skill or property that could produce enough income to support a family. Children were also seen as second-class citizens, essentially the property of their fathers.[10] The mother's status was so much lower than the father's that even when the mother did have custody, the courts usually absolved the father of paying child support.[11]

By the late nineteenth century, a number of humanitarian organizations such as the Children's Aid Societies, welfare bureaus, and the Charity Organization Societies, working in a climate of progressivism, helped to change the legal position of children. The notion that the child was the property of the father was slowly replaced with the view that the child had rights of his or her own. The mother's role also changed as an outgrowth of the Industrial Revolution. With the transformation from an agrarian society in which all family members worked together to an industrialized one in which the father worked outside the home, the mother increasingly had to stay home to take care of the children. This generated a change in the view of the mother's importance.[12]

The early years of the twentieth century were accompanied by continued industrialization and urbanization that further pulled families away from the farm. With these shifts in population, with the growing suffragist movement,

and later with the support of Freud, the mother's role came to be further respected as vital during the child's so-called tender years between birth and four, when the mother was the person most responsible for the child in an industrialized society.[13] Bowlby's work on maternal deprivation in the 1940s and 1950s further bolstered this idea of the mother's importance to the child.[14]

The changing view of the mother's role in child rearing affected the way the courts made their decisions when custody was disputed. The bias toward the mother during the middle fifty years of this century was such that the only way the father could obtain custody was to prove her unfit.[15]

This bias toward the mother remained intact until a few years ago, when, with the women's movement and other social changes, sex role expectations began to change. At present there is spirited debate over whether fathers and mothers have achieved parity in disputed court cases. Polikoff (1982) and Woods, Been, and Schulman (1982) claim that men now have the upper hand in court because judges are using economic criteria to decide who is most fit. In such a contest, the father has the advantage. Atkinson found, after a review of appellate court cases in 1982, that fathers and mothers were roughly equal in the number of contested cases won. He concluded that mothers may still hold the edge in the number of trial court cases won.[16] Regardless of who holds the edge, these decisions should be made in a sex-neutral fashion (see Polikoff 1984).

A cursory look at custody cases that have been reported in the *Family Law Reporter* (1982), which covers recent court decisions, shows great variation on the matter. Two cases exemplify this. In a Missouri court in 1982, the court found, ". . . if both parents are employed and equally absent from the home, the mother has no more part in training, nurturing, and helping in the child's development; and if everything is equal, the mother has no better claim to child custody." Here the issue of equality is soundly upheld.

A few months later, however, in Virginia, the state supreme court found in favor of the mother even though there were good reasons to give custody to the father: "Given the 'tender years presumption' in favor of mothers, the fact that a mother's third suicide attempt resulted in hospitalization and continuing psychiatric care does not deprive her of her superior custody rights against a father whom the court finds to be an 'excellent parent.'" From these cases one can see that the way a father or mother fares in court can be totally idiosyncratic to the state, the county, the judge who tries the case, and also the parents and their lawyers. This great variation makes it difficult to draw conclusions about whether either party holds the upper hand in disputed custody cases. It is clear, however, that the father's position has improved greatly during the last decade.[17]

These three areas of change—the women's movement along with the other social factors cited, the high divorce rate, and greater equality for men in court—are all responsible for increased involvement by fathers in parenting and for more single fathers gaining custody following separation and divorce.

The Survey

Despite the increase in the population of single fathers, we have very little information about them. A few small studies have used sample sizes of less than 100 drawn from one section of the country. The purpose of the research that underpins this book was to gather needed descriptive information about these fathers and to examine how comfortable and satisfied they felt meeting the tasks of single parenting. A number of variables were used to explore the impact of different factors on the father's experiences.

The study was carried out by placing a four-page questionnaire in the May 1982 issue of *The Single Parent*, a magazine published by Parents Without Partners (PWP). PWP, founded in 1957, is the largest self-help group for single parents in the United States. Any custodial or noncustodial parent—whether single, divorced, widowed, or never married—may become a member. At the time the survey was published, PWP's membership was slightly over 200,000. It is estimated that about one-third of that membership is male.

Divorced and separated fathers who were raising at least one child eighteen years old or younger for a majority of the time were invited to return the questionnaire that appeared in the magazine. Questionnaires that made up the final sample of 1,136 fathers were received between May and August 1982. At that point a data set was established, and questionnaires received after that time were set aside.

The fathers who made up the final sample had sole custody at least twenty nights a month or more. Fathers with joint or shared custody, or those whose children spent half their time somewhere else, were excluded from the survey. It was believed that such fathers would not have to make the same types of adjustment that fathers who had custody a majority of the time would have to make. For example, a father whose child's mother is readily available might not have to deal with such issues as a daughter's sexuality. Such matters could be left to the child's mother. Although many fathers with joint custody do handle these issues themselves, the possible variability could not be handled easily within the confines of this study. The father with primary responsibility for the child must either handle these matters himself or arrange to have a relative, teacher, friend, or other adult do so. Either way, this would require more work on the father's part.

Since the publication of the questionnaire, more than 100 personal and telephone interviews have been conducted (primarily with fathers living on the East Coast near the author) in order to bring a greater understanding to the information gained from the survey. These interviews, which were completed in October 1984, along with the questionnaire results, form the basis of this book. What we are hearing then is the father's story. (For a further discussion of the survey, its methodology, and limitations, see the appendix.)