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The Future of Fatherhood

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 By Wendy McElroy

FOX NEWS

One of the most significant battles in the 2002 gender wars was the role and rights of fathers -- especially when families have been ruptured by divorce.

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We can expect the cry for "fathers' rights" to ring loudly throughout 2003, as men demand that society reconsiders such issues as child support and child custody. It will not necessarily be women who men oppose in this fight. Men are confronting a governmental Goliath that has been called "[the child abuse industry](#)." In doing so, they defend not only fathers' rights but also those of mothers and children.

Some family situations clearly require legal intercession. Domestic violence may be an excellent reason to call the police. If a divorced parent refuses to pay agreed upon child support, civil court is an appropriate remedy. But government is no longer merely a last resort: It has assumed the role of surrogate parent, sometimes with greater rights than real parents.

The child protective services industry includes government bureaucracies -- e.g. federal and state child protective and support agencies -- that can track the minutia of a child's life: from school records to hospital visits, from every cent the family spends to the cleanliness of their kitchen floors. The industry consists of social workers, judges, bureaucrats, politicians, lawyers, therapists, commentators and others whose income depends on processing family concerns.

The industry is often dated back to the [Mondale Act of 1974](#) -- also known as the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) -- which offered federal matching funds to states with child abuse prevention and prosecution programs. The act was aimed at preventing child abuse, but it also established huge financial incentives to states and state agencies to uncover abuse, without providing any checks or balances to protect parents who are being wrongfully accused.

In crassly commercial terms, abused and neglected children are the source of a multibillion-dollar industry.

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The agencies and services that comprise the child protective system in the U.S. are a \$12 billion a year business, and fathers who have been tagged "abusive" or "negligent" are primary targets.

Several aspects of the evolving CAPTA have been criticized for encouraging false accusations without accountability:

-- Vague and ambiguous definitions of child abuse allow the term to be used subjectively by accusers and investigators.

-- Those accused are not informed of their rights nor given due process.

-- Under mandatory reporting laws, teachers, police officers, medical personnel and some others can face criminal penalties and the suspension of licenses if they fail to report suspected abuse. Thus, the reporting of frivolous or hysterical accusations.

-- Charges can be leveled through anonymous hotlines.

-- Immunity from liability is extended to child welfare workers and to false accusers.

And, so, the cry of "false reports!" began to rise, especially from fathers who said child abuse accusations were being used as negotiating tools in divorce disputes. The system was constructed to facilitate such accusations and to hobble those against whom they were leveled.

Under the Clinton administration, the child abuse industry bloated. The famous slogan, "It takes a village to raise a child" captured the approach. Child raising did not take two parents. It did not take a father. It took a village which, in practical terms, translated into a lot of government supervision.

The village viewed fathers with suspicion. For example, in 1996, as part of a drastic overhaul of the welfare system, Clinton tackled the problem of "[deadbeat dads](#)." He declared, "If every parent paid the child support they should, we could move 800,000 women and children off welfare immediately."

Thus, enforcing severe child support policies against *fathers* gave states the financial incentive of reducing welfare rolls and, later, of having payments go directly to their agencies. Again, fathers cried "[abuse](#)," especially those who faced criminal charges because the amounts assessed were unreasonable or because they were unable to pay due to factors such as unemployment.

The bureaucratic "village" continued to grow.

In 1997, the [Adoption and Safe Families Act](#) promoted adoption of the many children now stranded in foster care. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services declared in a Nov. 24, 1999, press release that the goal was "to double by 2002 the number of children in foster care who are adopted or otherwise permanently placed."

Again, there was a financial incentive for states to remove children from homes. The ASFA (Sec. 201) offered states "\$4,000 to \$6,000" for each child adopted beyond the state's "base number." It also provided "technical assistance" to help states raise

those numbers.

Although the fathers' rights movement is often characterized as men versus women, it is as accurate to view the movement as men opposing bureaucracies that act as custodial parents.

Fathers are fighting not merely for their own interests but also for the well being of children. [Reports and studies](#) indicate that children from fatherless homes are more likely to commit suicide, abuse drugs, turn to crime and end up in prison.

Moreover, the "custodial" bureaucracies are not necessarily child-friendly. In Florida, 5-year-old Rilya Wilson [was missing for 16 months](#) before the state CPS noticed, partly due to false visitation reports filed by her social worker. The ensuing scandal revealed that Florida could not find some 1,000 children "in its care." A [superficial search](#) of public records by a newspaper turned up children whom CPS could not find.

The fathers' rights movement may be the best chance North America has to return sanity and decency to family law, policies and procedures. It is necessary, if not for the sake of adults involved, then for the sake of the children.

*Wendy McElroy is the editor of [ifeminists.com](#) and a research fellow for The Independent Institute in Oakland, Calif. She is the author and editor of many books and articles, including the new book, *Liberty for Women: Freedom and Feminism in the 21st Century* (Ivan R. Dee/Independent Institute, 2002). She lives with her husband in Canada.*

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