

**Shared Parenting in Disadvantaged Families:  
Early Contexts, Interpretations, and Implications of Paternal Caretaking\***

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## **Shared Parenting in Disadvantaged Families:**

### **Early Contexts, Interpretations, and Implications of Paternal Caretaking**

Using a unique set of longitudinal qualitative interviews with parents who participated in the Fragile Families Study in Oakland, California, this paper examines the situations in which disadvantaged fathers shared caretaking responsibilities with mothers in the first four years of their child's life. Interviews with mothers and fathers indicate that many men acted as caretakers of their young children but that three different trajectories of paternal involvement emerged. Whereas some fathers actively chose to share caretaking with mothers throughout the early years of their child's life, other fathers acted as early or later caretakers to their children, largely in response to their families' socio-economic constraints. In addition to occurring within particular socio-economic and residential contexts, fathers' involvement in caretaking was interpreted differently by parents, who framed stable caretaking as a commitment, early caretaking as an exchange of resources, and later caretaking as compensation for mothers' reduced parenting. In an environment where parents' relationships were at high risk for dissolution, the contexts and meanings of paternal involvement also had significant implications for how parents viewed fathers' legal caretaking and support of children.