FAMILIES AND FATHERS

**Father’s Matter**

Being a father is not easy; however, it is the single most important job in the lives of men who have children. The challenges of being a responsible father sometimes seem too difficult and there’s no place to turn for help. If you, or someone you know, needs help to better provide for your children and yourself, a fatherhood program can help. (link to subpage – how a local fatherhood program can help)

**“Fatherhood is not just about being a man; it’s about being a family.”**

***Fatherhood Program Participant***

NAVIGATING CHILD SUPPORT

Navigating the child support system presents many challenges for low-income, non-custodial fathers. Check out these tips for navigating the system. (link to information about child support)

TRUTH ABOUT MARRIAGE

Marriage is not extinct though fewer and fewer couples marry these days. However, statistics verify that marriage remains the best arrangement for starting and raising a family. There man benefits of marriage; so, click on this link to learn more. (link to understanding the benefits of marriage)

FAMILIES AND FATHERS – SERVICES AND HELP – HOW A PROGRAM CAN HELP

If you are looking for assistance, please read on.

Are you a father needing assistance with many barriers standing in the way? Is the child support system on your back? Are you concerned that you may be called to court any day and worried that you will end up in jail because you have been there before? Is the mother of your child preventing you from seeing the child leaving you anxious that your child may conclude that you do not care about him/her? Are you out of a job and unable to provide money to go toward meeting your child’s needs? If you thought that the prospects of landing a job were possible, would you have transportation to go and apply? How do you feel about yourself? Perhaps sometimes you don’t even feel like a man.

At a local fatherhood program you will find a complete approach to overcoming these very obstacles to becoming an engaged, responsible father. You will find that the fatherhood program staff understands where you are — some of them have been in your very situation. They have helped hundreds of guys just like you. At a fatherhood program you will also meet other fathers facing the same challenges and willing to help each other find a better life for themselves and their families. You will be encouraged and motivated even when you feel like giving up; however, you will not find any crutches in a fatherhood program. You will get out of it exactly what you put in to it. The staff will provide information to increase your knowledge and skills linking to resources to execute your personal plan for a better life.

Fathers are encouraged to join and fully participate in the entire program rather than simply patching up the problem-of-the-day. Fathers are invited to attend weekly peer support meetings where they join other fathers to learn about and share the process of building new personal support networks with men who want to do better and be better. The fatherhood curriculum addresses a wide range of topics aimed at improving employment, parenting, family relationships and much more. Topics include:

Responsible Fatherhood

Spiritual Development

Effective Communication

Job Readiness and Employment

Understanding Child Support and the Legal System

Financial Management

Parenting and Co-Parenting

Healthy Relationships

Men’s Health and Education

Fatherhood program staff members provide one-on-one assistance to help participants achieve their individually set goals in a One Man Plan. Staff members assist in multiple ways including: receive guidance to navigate the child support system, mediation with the child’s mother and other family members, access to healthcare, record expungement, transportation, finding a job and stable housing. Make no mistake, a fatherhood program can not address every problem especially when specialized help is need for serious issues like drug and alcohol problems, violent behavior and mental illness; but, fatherhood programs have direct links to other organizations known and trusted for delivering excellent services. Fatherhood programs change lives and help men become the fathers they have always wanted to be. Search for a fatherhood program near you.

FAMILIES/FATHERS – SERVICES AND HELP – CHILD SUPPORT

**Navigating Child Support**

Non-custodial and divorced fathers often have trouble navigating the legal and child support system. The following tips may help:

* + Establish paternity.
  + Attend every child support hearing regarding your case.
  + Pay something even when you can not pay the full amount.
  + Document payments and keep receipts of purchases requested by the mother and paid on your child’s behalf.
  + Keep a record of dates and times when you did and did not work and the reasons why.
  + Keep copies of all documents from DSS, Family Court, a Clerk of Court, Attorney or the mother regarding child support and visitation.
  + Do not ignore official correspondence.
  + Contact DSS if you believe you are being harassed by a private child support collection agency.

(Read More –link to subpage – navigating child support)

**What if I can not pay my child support?**

Fathers are always encouraged to pay something toward their child support commitment to show a good faith effort even when they can not pay all that is owed. However, fathers who can not pay their child support orders in full are encouraged to immediately take steps to address their payment shortfall with Child Support Enforcement or Family Court before they fall too far behind. Child Support Enforcement or the Family Court may consider a reduction in child support if a significant change has occurred in a father’s life circumstances. The information contained in this paragraph does not constitute legal advisement.

(Connect to self help two pager and instructions for pro se modification (pdf))

**Establishing Paternity**

In South Carolina, when a child is born out-of-wedlock, the biological father has no legal rights or connection to the child until he establishes legal paternity. Fifty percent of children born in South Carolina are born to unmarried parents. When paternity has not been established:

The father’s name will not be on the birth certificate

The father will have no visitation or custody rights

The father will have no legal say in decisions such as education, medical treatment, religion, etc.

The father will not have “the right to be notified” when/if his child is being adopted.

IF YOU ARE NOT CERTAIN THAT YOU ARE THE FATHER, DO NOT COMPLETE A PATERNITY ACKNOWLEDGMENT FORM.

How is legal paternity established?

When a child is born within a legally recognized marriage, the male spouse of the mother is automatically designated as having legal paternity without any other action begin taken by the mother or her husband, regardless of whether or not he is the biological father. If the couple is unmarried or the biological father is someone other than the spouse of the mother, the biological father must complete the defined process to establish legal paternity. Read more to learn about establishing legal paternity.

How does establishing paternity help children?

Children benefit when paternity is established. Read to learn more about how children benefit when a biological father establishes paternity.

Does establishing paternity guarantee visitation

Legal visitation rights cannot be established without first establishing legal paternity. Often the biological father will form a personal relationship with his child without legal paternity or legal visitation rights. However, establishment of this relationship may depend solely on the discretion of the mother. If the mother decides to stop the father’s visits, the biological father who has not established both legal paternity and legal visitation rights has no legal recourse. Learn more about how to establish legal visitation (link to subpage on visitation)

**Obtaining Visitation**

Spending regular, quality time with your child is an important part of being a responsible father. But, face it; sometimes your child’s mother will not let you see the child. There are practical, legal steps that can be made to help improve and increase visitation opportunities.

1. If you have a strained relationship with the mother, seek help to improve your communication skills.
2. Pay your child support. It will be difficult to obtain visitation rights if you are not current on your child support payments.
3. Arrange to have a safe and child-friendly environment in which to spend time with your child.

In addition to practical steps, there are legal steps for obtaining visitation. (link to subpage on visitation)

**FAMILIES/FATHERS – SERVICES AND HELP – CHILD SUPPORT –Navigating child support-**

Navigating Child Support

Divorced or never-married fathers are often court-ordered to pay child support. Whether the child support order was established through private or Department of Social Services (DSS) mechanisms, most support payments are processed through the Clerk of Court where they are monitored. The following tips may help avoid trouble and provide guidance to navigate the system:

* Establish paternity. While this will obligate you to pay child support, it paves the way for the child to know who his biological father is and to visitation entitlement.
* Before establishing paternity, if in doubt at all, request a DNA test to verify that you are the father. Nearly four out of every ten fathers when tested are not found to be the biological father.
* If/when you are requested to attend a hearing to establish child support, by all means attend the hearing. Avoiding the hearing to establish child support may result in an order being set that is beyond your ability to pay. If you can not attend, compose a written request for a hearing on a future date. Bring documentation showing your current income. Do not overstate your income.
* If you can not pay the entire child support payment due, at least pay a portion of it. Show the court that you are making a good-faith effort. If you consistently can not pay due to a job change or job loss, request a modification to lower the payment amount through DSS or Family Court.
* If you have a DSS order and lose your job, notify them immediately. If you have a private child support order, contact the custodial parent as soon as possible should you lose your job. Always document your employment search efforts.
* If you and the mother agree on a visitation schedule, you may be able to include this agreement in a child support order established through DSS. This is only a possibility where the mother and father agree on visitation terms.
* Document payments made and keep receipts of purchases, fees, etc. paid on your child’s behalf at the mother’s request. Gifts to the child will usually not be counted by the Court in lieu of court-ordered support payments. Therefore, make your court payments first.
* Document when you work and when do and do not work and the reasons why. You may need this detailed information if you are required to attend a hearing.
* Keep a personal file that includes copies of all correspondence with DSS, Family Court, the Clerk of Court’s office, the mother, etc. regarding child support and visitation.
* Do not ignore correspondence from official agencies. Attend all scheduled hearings unless the court excuses you.
* Private child-support collection agencies often harass fathers. Contact DSS if you believe you’re being harassed. Do not make child support payments through a private child support collection agency. It may not be reported to the Clerk of Court’s office and the court may believe you are not making payments. Pay according to the child support the Family Court ordered.

**FAMILIES/FATHERS – SERVICES AND HELP – CHILD SUPPORT – PAYING CHILD SUPPORT - MODIFICATION**

Fathers are more likely to consistently pay when the established amount is manageable based upon his income. Circumstances change, however, and meeting the original court ordered amount can become unachievable. Consequently, arrears increase and penalties are applied which may lead to incarceration for non-payment. By taking immediate action and interacting with authorities to clearly present your situation, it is possible for child support orders to be reduced to a more manageable amount. The information contained in this paragraph does not constitute legal advisement.

**BASIC FACTS**

Child support orders are typically established in two ways: (1) by South Carolina Department of Social Services Child Support Enforcement (CSE); or (2) as part of a divorce proceeding. Orders established through CSE can be modified administratively by that agency. Child support obligations established as part of a divorce proceeding are called **Private Orders** and must be modified through the Family Court. A custodial parent can also request that a private order be enforced by CSE in which case the child support obligation can be modified by CSE administratively. If a CSE attorney is present at contempt hearings, the order is subsequently enforced by CSE. If you are unsure about enforcement, the clerk at the Family Court can provide information as to whether a child support court order is enforceable by CSE.

The steps to modify vary dependant upon the way in which the order was initially established.

**WHO MAY BE ENTITLED TO A REDUCTION?**

*Has the parent experienced a change in circumstances?*

The **three primary** “changes in circumstance” that warrant a modification is:

1. **Payor makes “substantially”** less income at current job than when the child

support order was established. The DSS/CSE standard formula used to define the term

“substantially” was calculated on the new child support worksheet resulting in the

amount owed being at least 20% less than before. Visit the [www.state.sc.us/dss/csed](http://www.state.sc.us/dss/csed) to calculate your child support payment according to CURRENT guidelines.

Note: You must have accurate financial information for the custodial parent to accurately determine whether the 20% less standard has been met. Often, this is not the case; therefore, a modification request should be made to document the lower rate of pay of the new job and the increased difficulties of making payments in a timely manner. It is important for fathers to clearly understand that DSS/CSE will only modify the support amount if that which should be paid is 20% less than what is currently being paid once the new worksheet has been calculated. The information contained in this paragraph does not constitute legal advisement.

2. **Payor** **has a biological/ adopted child living in his home** that was:

Born since the last child support order was established, or

Adopted since the last child support order was established

3. **Payor was injured or has a medical condition that prevents him from working.**

The condition must be documented by a licensed, medical doctor. The court and DSS/CSE want to receive a simple, written statement clearly defining the circumstances and presented by your medical provider.

**MAY ALSO CONSIDER EXTRAORDINARY EXPENSES, SHARED CUSTODY, OTHER ORDERS**

If the payor meets one of these three changes in circumstances, the following steps may be taken depending upon whether it is a CSE order or a private order.

***CSE Order – Payor parent has experienced a change in circumstances that warrants modification to their child support order. What steps should they take?***

***Step One:*** Write a letter to DSS/CSE advising that a change in circumstance exists and request modification to the child support order. Send this letter to the CSE caseworker assigned to your case in the regional office that enforces your order. The CSE website provides this information. Copy of a sample form letter provided. Note that in your letter you must fully identify who you are; state specifically what your change in circumstance is and definitively request a review of your case.

***Step Two:*** Collect attachments

Depending on the type of “change in circumstance,” the payor compose a version of the sample form letter which provides all relevant information needed by DSS/CSE to verify the parameters of the “change in circumstances.”

For example:

• Is the change in circumstances related to the income the father makes?

If so, attach at least two pay stubs from current job

• Is the change in circumstances related to a new child in the father’s home?

If so, attach birth certificate or adoption papers

• Is the change in circumstances related to a medical injury or illness?

If so, attach a statement from the doctor that clearly identifies the anticipated length of time that you will be unable to work and describes your inability to perform the same work and/or temporary inability to perform specific types of work.

***Step Three:*** Always keep copies all documents that you send to DSS/CSE or private agency.

It is recommended that you either hand deliver to the office or send documents by certified mail with a return receipt requested to the appropriate case worker.

**Payor parent should file legal modification paperwork with court if DSS/CSE unresponsive.**

***Private Order – Payor parent steps to reduce child support payments***

DSS/CSE will not be able to modify child support orders in the event that changes in circumstances have occurred. You will need to file your own legal paperwork with the Family Court requesting a modification.

This website offers downloadable self-represented litigant modification forms and instructions for those who need a modification and who pay pursuant to a private order.

***Prior to filling out the legal papers:***

A. Determine if the situation fits into one of the three primary categories for change-in-

circumstances, or applies to other possible considerations (additional examples will be provided at fatherhood programs)

B. Collect all relevant documents to confirm the parent’s change-in-circumstance

C. Determine whether or not you have the financial ability to pay to have the

legal papers processed.

The average cost involved in filing the modification papers are:

$150.00 filing fee paid to Family Court

$ 25.00 service of documents by Sheriff’s Department

$175.00 total expenses (note that some fees may vary for some counties)

D. If the non-custodial parent does not have the ability to pay the $175.00 to process the paperwork, it is suggested that they file, along with the Complaint for Decrease, a Motion and Affidavit to Proceed In Forma Pauperis which is downloadable from this website. The information contained in this paragraph does not constitute legal advisement.

For in depth instructions on modifying child support, read more (link to pdf of pro se modification instructions.)

**FAMILIES/FATHERS - - SERVICES AND HELP – CHILD SUPPORT – ESTABLISHING PATERNITY – Benefits to children**

**How does establishing paternity help children?**

Children benefit when fathers establish legal paternity.

Boosts Self Esteem

Children respond best when they receive love and support from both parents. They gain a sense of belonging and benefit knowing that both of their parents care for them. It is important that they know who their father is and that he cares about them

Creates Family Identity.

When children know they are part of a family, they are likely to be more secure in who they are. Establishing paternity identifies the father’s side of the family and encourages development of a relationship with his family.

Enables Shared parenting.

Parenting is the responsibility of both the father and the mother. Studies show that early establishment of paternity may lead to increased involvement by the father which often results in a decrease in high risk behavior by the children. More resources are available when both parents share the responsibility of raising their child.

Provides Health History

Establishing paternity helps establish the child’s health history. It is important for children and their physicians to know the family’s medical history.

Other Benefits Offered

Participation by both parents may expand children’s access to health insurance and/or benefits such as Social Security or inheritance.

**FAMILIES/FATHERS - - SERVICES AND HELP – CHILD SUPPORT – ESTABLISHING PATERNITY – How to**

**How** **can Lega**l **Patern**i**ty be estab**li**shed by an unmarr**i**ed father?**

There are several ways that a father can establish legal paternity and different points in time when it can be done. The methods for establishing legal paternity are as follows:

**In-hospital Paternity Establishment**

Prior to the child being born or while the mother is still in the hospital giving birth, the unmarried father can sign a Paternity Acknowledgement Affidavit. By signing the Affidavit (mother must sign as well) the father is acknowledging that he is the biological father. At the point where the signatures of mother and father are notarized, legal paternity exists. The father’s name will appear on the birth certificate and the father must consent to the name of the child before the child’s name appears on the birth certificate. However, the father signing the birth certificate alone without signing a Paternity Acknowledgement Affidavit does not constitute paternity. The father is only allowed 60 days to rescind the Affidavit through the Department of Vital Records after the Affidavit is signed.

**Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC)**

If the parents do not complete the Paternity Acknowledgement Affidavit at the hospital and they later wish to voluntarily establish paternity and place the father’s name on the birth certificate, they must complete the Affidavit at either the State DHEC Office or the county health department in the county where the child was born. Trained staff is available to answer questions and notarize parents’ signatures. There is a $15.00 fee for completion of the Affidavit at these locations.

**Department of Social Services/Child Support Enforcement Division**

Fathers may apply to DSS/CSE to establish legal paternity and conduct DNA testing.

The father must fill out a Non-Custodial Parent Application for Services (available at all DSS child support offices) and pay a $25.00 fee for the processing of the Application through DSS/CSE. This method is useful in situations where the mother has been unwilling to complete the Paternity Acknowledgement Affidavit. The DNA test costs the father absolutely nothing up front. However, fathers should be made aware that if DNA test results are positive, DSS will most likely encourage the mother to seek child support if the parents do not reside together. In addition, if the DNA test does come back positive, the father will be asked to repay the cost of the test ($125.00) over a period of time. The payments are often broken down into small, reasonable payments and should not prevent any father from seeking this route. If the DNA test is negative, the father will not be required to pay the DNA test fee and child support will not be pursued.

**DSS/Child Support Administrative Hearing**

If a father never established legal paternity through any of the above methods and the mother has applied to DSS/CSE to establish a child support order, DSS/CSE becomes responsible for pursuing the establishment of legal paternity prior to setting the child support order. The majority of fatherhood participants have established legal paternity through this method. Unfortunately, many of them are unaware that legal paternity was established at this hearing, and they are also unaware of the significance of legal paternity. During administrative hearings, DSS/CSE caseworkers will often ask the man if he is the biological father of the child without offering explanation as to the significance of his response. A father may respond in the affirmative, even though doubts exist; thus, a father may be completely unaware that by saying yes, legal paternity is forever established. If there is any doubt in the father’s mind regarding whether or not the child is his, a DNA test should be requested by the father at the initial DSS/CSE administrative hearing. Recent statistics from DSS/CSE indicate that in over 45% of the cases where a DNA test was requested by the father, the DNA test came back negative. Therefore, it is important that the test be requested if the father has any doubt. A doubtful father inevitably becomes a more reluctant payor once the child support order has been established.

**Private lawsuits and private genetic testing**

The last two methods are rarely seen in fatherhood programs geared to low-income fathers because both are relatively expensive methods for establishing legal paternity. However, the father may not involve DSS and instead pursue legal paternity by hiring an attorney to bring suit. The lawsuit, although identical to the case brought by DSS/CSE, will be considerably more expensive. In addition, the father may avoid going through DSS/CSE by utilizing a private lab.

However, the cost for the genetic test through most private labs is approximately $600.00 or more, and the money must be paid up front before the test is conducted. The information contained in this paragraph does not constitute legal advisement.

**FAMILIES/FATHERS - - SERVICES AND HELP – CHILD SUPPORT – Obtaining Visitation**

**Obtaining Visitation**

Legal paternity is the legal connection between father and child and is the premise for every parental right that a parent has including the right to seek visitation and/or custody. So before pursuing legal visitation, an unwed father must establish legal paternity.

Spending consistent, quality time with your child is an important part of being a responsible father. Even so, sometimes the child’s mother will not allow visitation for the father. There are practical, legal steps to take to help improve visitation.

1. If you have a strained relationship with the mother, seek help to improve communication skills
2. Pay your child support. It is more difficult to obtain visitation rights when child support payments are not up-to-date.
3. Arrange for a safe and child-friendly environment in which to spend time with your child.

In addition to practical steps, there are legal steps for obtaining visitation.

H**o**w **does a father estab**li**sh** l**ega**l **v**i**s**i**tat**i**on r**i**ghts?**

Once legal paternity has been established, fathers may seek legal visitation rights. The majority of fatherhood program participants establish legal paternity through a DSS/CSE administration hearing. However, the role played by state agencies in general and specifically DSS/CSE in assisting fathers to establish legal visitation rights is often misunderstood. Although DSS/CSE can establish legal paternity and establish a child support order, DSS/CSE the agency receives no federal funds to establish legal visitation rights for the father. In fact, DSS/CSE is not permitted to utilize any of their current funding for visitation issues without first receiving a written waiver from the federal government. There are no state agencies that assist fathers with establishing legal visitation rights in South Carolina. Legal aid assistance is also unavailable to any father who exceeds the minimal income guidelines that have been mandated. Generally speaking, if the father works a full-time job at minimum wage, then he exceeds these very minimal guidelines. For these fathers, the fact that they are working to consistently pay child support, ironically, disqualifies them from receiving any legal assistance to establish their legal visitation rights. The end result is that most low-income fathers seeking visitation rights must hire a private attorney to establish it. Since this process is beyond the financial means of many low-income fathers, most continue to rely solely on the goodwill of the custodial parent for contact with their children. Without a legal visitation order, low-income fathers have no recourse if the custodial parent terminates the visitation schedule. Unfortunately, many fathers retaliate and withhold child support payments; however, that action only worsens the father’s legal problems.

U**se of the Pro** S**e** Vi**s**i**tat**i**on** C**om**pl**a**i**nt**

The term **Pro Se** simply refers to the filing of legal paperwork by a party to the action.

In other words, the father is not represented by an attorney, but files the legal paperwork himself to establish legal visitation rights. In the past, most Family Court judges were unwilling to entertain pro se complaints for legal visitation in their courtrooms because they did not fully understand the limited choices available to low-income fathers. Increased awareness and education of the judi­ciary on this issue, has caused more Family Court judges throughout the state to allowing pro se complaints for visitation to be filed and heard in their courtrooms. In addition, under the leadership of our State Supreme Court, Family Court judges have been reminded that pro se petitioners who correctly file their legal paperwork have every legal right to a court hearing on the issue before the court. Click here to receive instructions to complete a Pro Se Packet for Visitation that can be used by a father for establishing his legal visitation rights as a pro se litigant.

**Where does the father f**il**e h**i**s Pro** S**e** Vi**s**i**tat**i**on** C**om**pl**a**i**nt?**

Complaints for visitation, in general, must be filed in the county/state in which the child resides. Under most scenarios, this means that the father will file the visitation complaint in the same county where the child support action commenced. However, the unfortunate father whose child has moved out of state must file their legal paperwork in the county and state where the child currently resides.

**“Parenting Time” Guidelines**

Prior to filing the pro se complaint, the father seeking visitation should consider what he is looking for from the Family Court in terms of a visitation schedule. The visitation schedule should be a practical schedule that takes into account the age and needs of the child, along with the expected work hours of the father. Parenting Time Guidelines are available which can assist fathers to determine age appropriate visitation schedules. These guidelines highlight that the needs of the child must be first and foremost in the mind of the father. In essence, this means that a visitation schedule requested for an infant will differ significantly from a visitation schedule for a school aged child. Attached are sample Parenting Time Guidelines which can be used by fathers when requesting a suitable visitation schedule from the court. (link to Parenting Time Guidelines pdf)

**Final Visitation Order**

Finally, it is important that the language in the final visitation order specify the visitation schedule. If it is not clear, the court is powerless to enforce a vague Visitation Order. The following wording appeared in a Visitation Order, “father is entitled to reasonable and liberal visitation rights.” Although it sounds good, it is unenforceable because no specific visitation schedule has been outlined. Since the father may not have the skills to prepare the order as detailed as needed, he can offer the guidelines to the court as an attachment to the Final Order. The judge can then reference the parenting time guidelines and relevant sections that were decided upon in the Final Order.

**Connection between Child Support and Visitation**

The current law views child support and visitation as two totally separate issues.

Therefore, the payment history of the father should not be an issue at the visitation hearing. Likewise, the Court will not entertain the father’s complaints regarding his lack of visitation at child support hearings. When visitation is brought up by fathers during hearings, many interpret the Court to be uncaring; this is not necessarily true. The reality is that the issue of visitation is not before the Court on that day. However, if the father has a legal visitation order in which the child spends more than 109 overnights with the father (30% of the child’s time), the father may request to have his child support obligation calculated differently using the Shared Parenting Worksheet. The use of this worksheet will result in a lower child support obligation each month because it takes into account the time spent with the father. A copy of the Shared Parenting Worksheet may be obtained at any regional DSS/CSE office. For the father, it is yet another incentive to formalize the visitation schedule through a legal visitation order.

**What** i**f the** F**ather has a** l**ega**l **v**i**s**i**tat**i**on order but** i**s be**i**ng den**i**ed h**i**s** vi**s**i**tat**i**on r**i**ghts by the** M**other?**

Current South Carolina law permits a father to file a Pro Se Affidavit stating that his visitation rights are being denied. This form affidavit is available at every Family Court clerk’s office in the state. The Court will schedule a Rule to Show Cause hearing asking the mother to show cause as to why the father is being denied visitation. If the mother is found in contempt, the penalties are up to one year in jail and/or a $1500.00 fine. The availability of a similar affidavit will vary from state to state. However, most states have in place a similar process. Fathers must simply contact the Family Court where the original visitation order was issued and inquire as to the process practiced by that particular county.

**FATHERS AND FAMILIES – SERVICES AND HELP – UNDERSTANDING THE BENEFITS OF MARRIAGE**

**Getting married is a life occurrence that can change everything. You may be one of those guys who thinks that getting married only means being tied down to a life you never planned. But for others, getting married is the best thing that ever happened to them – and their children.**

**Is saying “I do” right for you?**

Sure, marriage can change things. And it has to be a choice that’s right for you. You may not have given much thought to marriage and there’s a lot you may not know. But, before you make up your mind, take some time to learn the facts and see how marriage can be a good thing for you and your family

The cold hard truth about marriage (link to subpage)

Would you make a good husband? ( link to subpage)

How can marriage benefit your children? (link to subpage)

Marriage can be one of the most important decisions you will ever make. But, first, decide if you are ready to get married.

**FATHERS AND FAMILIES – SERVICES AND HELP – UNDERSTANDING THE BENEFITS OF MARRIAGE – the truth about marriage**

**The cold hard truth about marriage**

* The more you now about marriage, the easier it is to make a choice that’s right for you. Your friends or family might have told you some unflattering things about marriage. Remember, that their words describe the circumstances of their own marriages. It is different for everyone, and there are definitive facts about marriage that are generally true for everyone.
* Married people are healthier and live longer that unmarried people. True. Unmarried people die sooner than married people – about 250% higher among men. When married, men are more likely to settle down and stop risky behaviors like drinking, drugs and unsafe sex – helping them live longer lives.
* Getting married is bad for your finances. False. Most of the time, both men and women are better off financially when they marry because they can share their spouse’s current and future incomes. Married men can also earn 10 to 40% more because they lead more settled lives. They miss work less and are more focused on earning money to support their family.
* Children are no better off with single parents than married ones. False. Most of the time, children are better off when their real, biological, parents are married, living in the same home and in a healthy relationship. Married parents are usually better educated and earn more. Having more money reduces conflict and makes it easier for parents to spend time with their children.
* Marriage strengthens the bonds between fathers and their children. True. Married men spend more time and have better relationships with their children than single or divorced fathers. This is mainly because married fathers share the same home with their children. But, it is also because marriage encourages men to take responsibility for their own children.
* Married people are happier than single or divorced people. True. In most cases, married people say they are happier with their lives. They also say they have less depression and anxiety than people who are single living with a partner.
* Married people have more and better sex than single people. True. According to several surveys, married people say they have sex more often than singles and are more satisfied with their sex lives.

**FATHERS AND FAMILIES – SERVICES AND HELP – UNDERSTANDING THE BENEFITS OF MARRIAGE – would you make a good husband**

**Would you make a good husband?**

* Before you even think about getting married, seriously consider what it takes to be a good husband. Here are some common things women look for in a potential husband.
  + Education or training beyond high school
  + Decent jobs or work skills
  + Drug free
  + Communicates well and solves problems in a nonviolent way
  + Takes on fatherhood responsibilities
  + Balances needs of children from previous relationships with needs of current relationship
  + Ready to settle down and commit to one person
  + Willing to be sexually faithful

**FATHERS AND FAMILIES – SERVICES AND HELP – UNDERSTANDING THE BENEFITS OF MARRIAGE- Benefits to children**

**How marriage can benefit your children**

* You may already know what it is like to have grown up without a dad. Your own father might have caused your family more harm than good; but, you do not have to repeat that pattern for your children. Marriage is one way to help you become the dad you never had.
* Kids that are raised by parents in healthy marriages are:
  + More likely to do well in school and go on to college
  + Physically and emotionally healthier
  + Less likely to be raised in poverty
  + Less likely to abuse drugs or alcohol
  + Less likely to commit delinquent behaviors
  + Less likely to be a victim of physical or sexual abuse
  + More likely to have a better relationship with their parents
  + Less likely to divorce when they get married
  + Less likely to father a child in their teenage years
  + Less likely to be sexually active as teenagers, and less likely to get sexual diseases
  + More likely to receive moral, spiritual and physical support

**FATHERS AND FAMILIES – SERVICES AND HELP – PARENTING -**

DADS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Society has slowly acknowledged fathers’ unique, vital contributions to child development. An infant only eight weeks old can tell whether a male or female is interacting with them. This diversity alone gives children a broader, richer experience than children raised by one gender. Generally, mothers and fathers parent differently; so, consider the information below as generally accepted by child development experts, realizing exceptions can and do occur. (link to subpage – dads make a difference)

**Could you be the father of a child born out of wedlock?**

In 2009 the South Carolina General Assembly established the Responsible Father Registry but few unwed fathers know about it (link to subpage on Responsible father registry)

**FATHERS AND FAMILIES – SERVICES AND HELP – PARENTING - DADS MAKE A DIFFERENCE**

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**Fathers play differently.**

Mothers cuddle babies while fathers bounce them. Fathers roughhouse within limits while mothers soothe. One style encourages independence, the other security.

**Fathers push limits.**

Fathers encourage children to take risks. Mothers protect and exercise caution. Together, they balance out and help children remain safe while building confidence.

**Fathers communicate differently.**

Mothers use simple words and effectively speak on the children’s level. Fathers challenge a child to expand his vocabulary and linguistic skills, vital to academic success. Child will experience both styles in life.

**Fathers discipline differently.**

Educational psychologist Carol Gilligan points out that fathers stress justice, fairness, and duty teaching objectivity and consequences, while mothers stress sympathy, care, and help. To exercise one over the other is not enough; using them together creates a healthy, proper balance.

**Fathers prepare children for real life.**

Most mothers primarily see the outside world as potentially harmful to their children and want to shelter them (i.e. accidents). Fathers focus on preparation for the world’s harshness and the consequences evoked by displaying certain attitudes and behaviors. Developing both views is necessary.

**Fathers teach respect for women.**

Girls growing up with positive, involved dads are more likely to develop healthier relationship with boys in adolescence and men in adulthood. Having witnessed and experienced proper behavior from men in their lives helps young women build emotional security and protects against predatory males. Fathers also help weed out bad candidates for suitors and potential husbands. Boys raised with fathers are more likely to be good husbands if they emulate their fathers’ successes and learn from their failures.

Adapted from Palmetto Family Council “How Daddies Make a Difference: The unique Contributes of Fathers to Proper Child Development” Palmetto Perspective November 1999

**FATHERS AND FAMILIES – SERVICES AND HELP – PARENTING – Responsible Father Registry**

**Could you be the father of a child born out of wedlock?**

You must act to protect your rights. South Carolina has the Responsible Father Registry which allows you to place your name, address and the names of the birth mother and child (if known) on the Registry. You can file before or after the child is born but you must do so before an action to terminate parental rights or for adoption has been filed with the court.

Once your name is listed on the registry, your parental rights cannot be terminated and your child cannot be adopted without you being given notice. If you move or change your address, you must notify the Registry of the change of address or you will lose your right to receive notification. Once you register, you will receive a certificate from the Department of Social Services that verifies that you have filed this claim.

If you do not file the claim of paternity with the Registry, the law states that you have given up your right to receive notice or be named as a party and served with papers if a case for termination of parental rights or adoption is filed. The law does require that you be given notice if any one of these four situations exists: (1) a court has found you to be the father of the child, (2) your name is on the birth certificate, (3) you are openly living with the child, the child’s mother, or both, or (4) the mother has named you as the father in a sworn, written statement.

You, as the father, are the only one who can file this claim; no one else can do it for you. If, at a later date, you decide that this was not the right thing for you to do, you may file a revocation with the Department of Social Services. This action cancels the claim.

There is no cost to you to file the claim, revoke the claim or change your address.

When you file the claim, you are not admitting paternity of the child; and, your claim can not be used in court as evidence in any proceeding. The Department of Social Services keeps the Registry which is not subject to public information. The Registry can only be checked under these circumstances: (1) when the Department of Social Services has an open child welfare case and has filed a written request, or (2) when a child placing agency or an attorney handling an adoption or termination of parental rights case files a written request. The Department of Social Services may not use the registry to locate non-custodial parents to establish or enforce child support.

You may file a claim with the Responsible Father Registry online at <https://ssl.sc.gov/DSSFatherRegistry/FatherReg/RegIndex.aspx>. You will need to create an account and complete the on-line form. Or, print out the form, complete it by hand and mail it to the following:

South Carolina Department of Social Services

Responsible Father Registry

P.O. Box 1520

Columbia, SC 29202

Visit [www.scchildrencomefirst.org](http://www.scchildrencomefirst.org) for more information.