Fathers have long been ambiguous participants in the lives of American families. On the one hand, in the "ideal family" immortalized by television programs of the 1950s—Ozzie and Harriet, Father Knows Best—Father is a very important person. He provides material sustenance for the family while Mother stays home to see to the family's emotional and physical needs. But beyond his status as provider, he is the representative of the family in the world, the person whose activities define the cultural and social status of his family.

On the other hand, documentation of what actual fathers do has shown men to be marginal to the family in some ways, more occupied with their roles in the outside world of work than with the relational core of the family. Many men spend little time with their children, contribute little besides money to the ongoing operation of the household, and after divorce have been known to sever relationships not only with their wives but with their children. Despite claims from some quarters that a new, more engaged, postfeminist fatherhood is on the rise, along with a "daddy track" to rival women's focus on their families, research continues to confirm the familiar picture of fathers as removed from both the affective and instrumental centers of family life.

But for female-headed families, fathers are no longer even those people who perform specialized "masculine" tasks in a domestic microcosm of gender; they are almost totally absent. In these conditions, motherhood cannot be constructed as complementary to fatherhood; rather, unmarried mothers manage their situations successfully to the extent that they can maintain autonomy, demonstrating that they don't...
Lesbian Mothers need another parent to achieve their goals. These mothers subconsciously serve as both mothers and fathers, and while the stresses of managing both aspects of parenting may have its price, mothers, as we saw earlier, also take pride in their ability to meet the challenges of heading a family. For lesbians, not surprisingly, maternal achievements may have an additional meaning: motherhood can be an arena in which stigmatized identity meets normality, as lesbian mothers do what most women do.

Mothers tend to separate their children's relationships with their fathers from their own connections with these men, their actions with regard to the children's fathers generally reflect their evaluation of the quality of their relationship with the children, regardless of the mothers' own preferences. Relationships with ex-husbands vary with the current legal status of the union, the terms under which the relationship ended, the specific arrangement for visitation and child support that have been agreed upon or ordered by the court and the extent to which they are observed, and the status of continuing disputes. Other considerations enter the picture when the parents have not been married. Mothers whose children resulted from a significant relationship with a man may maintain ongoing ties that resemble those of formally married women with their ex-husbands. Women whose children were conceived through donor insemination or as a result of a short-term or casual liaison have little or no basis for a personal relationship with their children's fathers. While some are pleased by this anonymity, as it insulates them from threats to their autonomy, others worry that their children have been deprived of an opportunity to know their fathers, though what they expect the children to gain from such a relationship they do not always clearly specify.

Most mothers see fathers as necessary to their children's development in a variety of ways, as sources of ongoing material and parental support, as role models for their sons, and as sources of biological connectedness to anchor the child in a world defined by the presumed resilience of kinship ties. Lesbian mothers are no less intent than heterosexual mothers in their pursuit of a sustaining tie to the child's father. Those who can identify the father emphasize their efforts to encourage his relationship with the child. Achieving this goal not
only demonstrates their competence in providing everything they believe a child needs to develop normally but appears to be a major factor in the way they assess their skill and success as mothers.

Circumstances, however, may make this objective elusive. Some fathers are unwilling to cooperate because of competing commitments or apparent disinterest and prove to be unreliable or erratic in meeting obligations to the children. And for some mothers, relationships with fathers are so acrimonious that they can be activated only at considerable emotional cost.

Further complications arise when mothers face custody or other legal difficulties. All interactions with the father occasion some risk for lesbian mothers, but these women describe themselves as working hard to provide the children with a relationship with their father. High among the obligations they associate with being a "good mother" is the provision of a father, not just a "male role model.

Despite the unconventionality of their households, these mothers still conceive of fathers principally in terms of their blood connections to their children. Most of them do not explicitly reject the notion that there is something else fathers do, something that another man or a female lover might be able to provide. They seem to construe fathers' contributions as either very specific (and narrow) instrumental ones or as consisting of a connectedness that is as important to children as three square meals a day and eight hours of sleep. Lesbian mothers, no less than heterosexual single mothers, are sure that knowing one's father is a good thing but are hard put to explain why. It seems to me that their efforts to remain connected to the father (even to the sperm donor) represent the same high value they place on blood ties in general.

What Makes Fathers Important?

Lesbian mothers share with other mothers an assumption that fathers should be continuing figures in their children's lives. Though few mothers are able to be very specific about what makes this relationship important, their accounts of the kinds of problems they have faced with their children's fathers reveal underlying belief about the
Lesbian Mothers

nature of father-child relationships. Mothers' efforts to maintain significant interaction between their children and the children's fathers range from the perfunctory to the heroic. The implication is that the responsible mother will encourage these ties, and judged that one measure of the mother's commitment and selflessness is the extent to which she succeeds in this area.

Though these views sometimes seem to depend on an implicit theory that children learn different kinds of things from fathers than they do from mothers, more often they reflect a desire for children to feel wanted by the noncustodial parent. Mothers occasionally express the view that contact with fathers offers psychological or developmental benefits of some sort to the child. But more central to their meaning seems to be the idea that ordinary children have fathers and that a lesbian mother's child should have one too. Other male family members and male friends of the mother cannot provide this sense of connectedness and normality, although they can offer children a valued opportunity to become acquainted with men or to learn skills and behaviors associated with men. In similar fashion, the consensus of women who have become mothers through donor insemination often centers on the child's presumed need to have a known social father in order to understand something vital about their origins. Unless they have access to the same knowledge of their biological roots that children in conventional families have, how will they know who they are?4

Never-Married Mothers

Lesbian mothers whose children were born outside of a marital situation are, as might be expected, far from uniform in their views of fathers. For some he is a social presence, a continuing part of their lives and of their children's lives, a "father" with developed paternal obligations. For others he has depersonalized or been removed from their social world, with various scenarios and varying degrees of continuing contact. For yet others he is not a social being at all, a "donor" rather than a father, though the specific reasons for maintaining separation vary considerably.
Social fatherhood can take many forms. Sarah Klein, who had her year-old daughter, Emily, in a relationship with a man to whom she is still close, has worked out an informal arrangement approximating joint custody. Sarah always wanted to have children and resisted identifying herself as a lesbian for some years because she thought femininity precluded motherhood. When she learned she was pregnant, she and her woman lover were in the middle of a temporary separation. She met Seth Barker, her child's father, through political work, and was strongly attracted to him. Once she became pregnant, though, her attraction to him dissolved. In retrospect, Sarah suspects that her attraction to Seth had more to do with her procreative urges than anything truly special about him.

Despite his resentment about the end of their relationship, he has willingly assumed a parental role with their daughter. He lives nearby and typically sees her several times a week. Seth has very little money, so he does not make regular contributions, but sometimes he buys an item of clothing or a toy for Emily. Sarah feels that he's a good influence on Emily, insofar as he is an “atypical, nonmacho” man. Though she considers him a parent and discusses some child-rearing issues with him (as she does with her lover), she sees herself as the sole decision maker where their daughter is concerned. His willingness to accept this stance stems, in her view, from his respect for her innate good judgment as the mother.

Bonnie Pereira, who works as a licensed vocational nurse, would like her twelve-year-old Tina to have a more meaningful relationship with her father. Bonnie was already a lesbian when she got involved with Bob; when she found she was pregnant, she wanted to have the baby on her own, though Bob was eager to marry her. In the early years he visited her often and seemed to be interested in having a relationship with Tina. He was never comfortable with Bonnie's woman lover, though, and visits tended to be tense for that reason. As time went on, his visits became much less frequent, and finally ceased altogether.

Bonnie feels that she should do everything she can to keep the channels of communication open between Bob and Tina. The relationship has been painful for her daughter, mainly because her conv-
Lesbian Mothers

Lesbia's presence is less than firm. His pattern has been to make appointments with Tina and then fail to show up. Bonnie has had to console Tina on the many occasions this has happened.

I have done what I can do. I have written, you know, and I have called and I've let him know where I've moved to and so forth and so on, and then I've made it very clear that he's never going to be turned away from her if she wants to see his daughter. It's made that decision herself, that he feels uncomfortable. I guess.

And I still feel that it's too late, and it's a shame that he can't and won't do it now. But I also know that people have reasons for whatever they do, and people have their own pace that they have to go by, and when he's ready he'll appear.

Other lesbian mothers report relaxed, informal relationships with their child's fathers; these relationships tend to be those in which money is not an issue. Christine Richardson, a successful musician who had her child after a brief affair with a man she'd known for many years, decided against an abortion because she had always wanted a child and knew she could provide for it herself. The father, Ted Campbell, did not object to having his name appear on the birth certificate and he takes an interest in their son, visiting with increasing frequency as the child gets older. Though he makes no financial contribution, his mother recognizes the child as her grandchild and periodically sends him gifts. The ease with which Christine and Ted have been able to maintain their relationship clearly has a lot to do with the minimal demands she makes on him. Since Christine doesn't depend on him for money (and doesn't expect to in the future), and since they apparently have had no disputes about the frequency of his visits or about his parent's recognition of the child, Christine has little reason to anticipate conflict. And yet her description of her relationship with Ted can be seen more as a statement of her own ability to incorporate motherhood into her already competent way of living than as a literal account of their varied interactions.

Jessy Underwood, now living on AFDC, had two children with one man and two more with another. Although she had bad relationships with women for many years, she has also been involved with a number of men. The two who fathered her children both lead rather disorganized lives. Both are dependent on drugs and alcohol and are
Life with Father

Neither of them has taken any responsibility for the children or offered anything in the way of financial support. All the same, her children wanted relationships with their fathers, and any solution had to come from Jessy. The father of her older daughter, now fifteen, has taken virtually no interest in her.

He still doesn't care. . . . He doesn't send any money. . . . He's still doing the same thing he did. . . . selling dope, working with women. I had a hard time making my daughter realize [when she wanted to meet her father]. . . . But after a while she understood that he didn't care, because if he did, he would write, he would call.

Though Jessy doesn't want her daughter to have a bad image of her father, neither does she like to see her glorifying a person she knows little about. All of her children have a tendency to call the man who fathered her sons “daddy,” as he does visit occasionally and Jessy is still friendly with him. But she never even considered putting either father’s name on the birth certificates.

I just didn't want [their names] on. I knew that wasn't going to happen, I wasn't going to marry anybody, you know. I knew they weren't going to give up no dough. . . . And then I don't want the risk of anybody taking them away from me. Because they're mine. And I consciously made the effort to love these children. So I wasn't going to have anybody be able to take them away from me. Courts care and all that bullshit.

For Laura Bergeron, a civil servant who lives in Menlo Park with her three children, motherhood has been a solitary venture. The children know who their fathers are, but she expects little from these men other than their willingness to be identified as the children’s fathers. Laura’s two sons, now ten and eight, were born while she was in a long-term relationship with their father. He did not want to have children, though once she agreed not to hold him responsible for anything, he was willing to cooperate in impregnating her. Although he was not an active parent while they still lived together, he refused to change a diaper or even to watch the children—the boys’ father is now quite involved with them, sometimes baby-sitting and providing
Laura with relief from total responsibility. His name is on the boys' birth certificates and they use his last name.

The circumstances surrounding the birth of her daughter five years ago were somewhat different. Laura had come out as a lesbian after the birth of her second son. She felt strongly that she wanted to have a daughter and at thirty-five had begun to worry that she would soon be too old to have another baby. She finally decided to advertise for a sperm donor, a strategy that brought many responses but none that appeared to be legitimate. Finally a man who had recently moved into her house as a roommate offered to serve as the donor. She took estrogen douches and carefully monitored her fertile periods to ensure that she would conceive a girl, and views the birth of her daughter as evidence that these methods are effective. She and the donor made a written contract relieving him of both social and financial obligations to her daughter and agreeing that his name would never be used for any official purposes. In Laura's view, he is "just" a sperm donor, though one with whom she has a limited personal relationship.

I was really grateful for that because the one thing that had bothered me about the sperm donor thing was although I didn't feel that I needed two parents, you know, I wanted my child to know who her father was so she wouldn't have all this business of chasing around the world looking if she ever got it into her head that she needed to know. So this way he's a friend of the family.

Laura and her daughter share a last name different from her sons'. At the time of her daughter's birth, she chose to replace her original surname with that of her lover in the hope of establishing a stronger basis for guardianship in case of emergency.

I wanted, in case anything happens to me, like if I get in an accident or something, [I] would want my lover to take my daughter. Because the father would take the boys, see, but she would be responsible for my daughter and I just thought it might be easier if she did something legal about it, so as far I wasn't too keen, and then I'm working up a thing where, you know, a legal paper that would give her guardianship.
Life with Father

Some mothers attempt to limit their children's interactions with their fathers because they fear that the fathers may interfere with their own autonomy or make other claims. For Patricia Atkins, for instance, who lived with her son's father for many years, determining how much contact she wants with him is a major strain. The father, Edward Draper, did not cooperate at all in the care of their son while they were living together, but Patricia's financial situation has been difficult since she left him. She is struggling to keep her son in a private school and to set up a new household while earning low wages in a secretarial job. She thinks she could get some money from Edward but worries about being obligated to him. Still, she has turned to him for financial help in emergencies, most recently for the $300 she needed to move into her new apartment.

He would probably send me money monthly if I ask for it. But I prefer not to, because somehow money . . . gives the person power, or they think it gives them power and I don't want to play those games. . . . So far, as a person, I would prefer to do as I am doing it. And that is to let him buy some clothes for our son every once in a while. If he wants to pay the school directly or something, he has to pay the school directly, but I do not want to see the money come through me. Because I want to make sure that I am in control of what is going on in my life.

At the same time that Patricia worries that Edward may assume too great a role in their lives, she wants her son, now seven, to have an ongoing relationship with his father. She has encouraged visits and phone calls, and believes that the boy's need to interact with men is demonstrated by the way he behaves with his male teacher at school. Her view of the relationship places the entire burden for its existence on her: she must make sure it happens, but also take care that it does not happen too often.

The existence of a social father is even more elusive for still other lesbian mothers. Regina Carter lives alone in Berkeley with her six-year-old daughter. She had the baby after a short relationship with a man and never planned to become pregnant; the relationship collapsed before her daughter's birth and they have maintained minimal contact since then. Regina did not put her name on the birth certifi-
Lesbia n Mothers

car. She knows his address and has had occasional visits from him, perhaps once a year. He has never made a financial contribution and reacted angrily on the one occasion when she asked him to contribute $50 a month.

Not all the mothers think that having contact with a father is particularly desirable. Kathy Lindstrom, an insemination mother who lives with her lover and a six-month-old son, expresses only limited interest in getting information about the donor. She thinks it would be useful to know his ethnic background, though she's not at all sure what effect this information, or the knowledge that he was conceived by artificial insemination, will eventually have on her son. Her male friends will provide quite enough opportunity for interaction with men, she thinks; too much masculine influence might be harmful.

I think he's better off not having a father . . . . I don't feel he'll be harmed by a man's expectations of him showing his manhood and all.

Kathy says that there is no shortage of people from whom her son can learn "masculine" things such as sports, models in these areas need not even be men. She believes that her maturity (she is thirty-two) and the fact that she lives with a lover makes her situation different, in any case, from that of a "true single mother," and that she faces few of the difficulties that single mothers typically experience.

Similarly, Lilly Parker, who has a one-year-old daughter and is currently supported by AFDC, feels that she should conceal information about how she became pregnant from everyone in her network. She is still uncertain how to handle the situation when people ask her about her "husband," and generally allows people to think that she has one when it seems appropriate.

There's a lot of mystery around her conception, so that I don't tell everybody the same story . . . . I don't have a "husband," I know who he is, who he is, and a bit about him. He doesn't know that he's the father . . . . I don't want him to be the only half-assed involved. I'd rather have no involvement at all. I don't feel like he is a father. I feel like he's a donor.
Life with Fetus

Lilly complains about the possessiveness men develop toward their offspring and mocks the notion that being a father, which she sees as no more than contributing sperm, is a big achievement. She hopes to have another child in the next few years but would get an anonymous donor and use in vitro fertilization the next time. Then she would have no need to resort to subterfuge to protect her family.

Although never-married mothers rarely have custody problems, some of them nonetheless are preoccupied with the fear that someone might try to take their children. Nineteen-year-old Louise Green felt threatened because she was acquainted with the gay man who donated sperm when she wanted to conceive a child. She never told him her real name and moved to the Bay Area from another state as soon as she knew she was pregnant to shield any effort he might make to trace her whereabouts. After these maneuvers, however, she no longer knows how to locate the donor should she wish to do so in the future. Louise's feeling of vulnerability stems as much from her marginal economic situation—she is on AFDC—as from her lesbianism.

Deep down, I wish [my daughter and the donor] could know each other. I kind of want to share her with someone because she's so wonderful, but I just don't trust him... I felt not threatened about that. I felt not threatened in general about child custody things. A lot of it, by my being a lesbian I feel like it's a threat; my being young is a threat; my being poor is a threat.

Lesbians who have their babies through insemination are often quite concerned about the ethics of having a child under these circumstances. Maggie Walters, whose daughter is eighteen months old, used a clinic to obtain the sperm after failing to locate a donor among the men she knew. She had many misgivings about doing so in view of her economic and career status and the problems a child might have with a lesbian mother.

But the biggest thing I worried about was... having the baby that was going to be artificially inseminated and wouldn't know who their biological father was, much less have a father.
Lesbian Mothers

Grace Garsen, whose three-year-old son was conceived through in vitro fertilization, also worries about being able to contact the donor. She found him through a gay male friend. Although she agreed at the time that the donor should remain anonymous, Grace now has second thoughts about these arrangements.

"There's a problem... in that I feel a responsibility that when [my son] is a teenager that he be able to locate his biological father. But I haven't set it up so that that can happen and I feel a little bad about that because I feel like I'm asking an additional thing of the donor which he didn't promise."

Grace is not very specific about what she feels her son would gain by being acquainted with his "father." She has a generalized fear of being in touch with the donor because of her knowledge of lesbian custody cases. She doubts that her son will encounter bias because he spends a lot of time with other children who don't know who their fathers are, particularly with other children of lesbian mothers. Though she believes that male role models are important, she also claims that boys can provide them for each other and that other men, such as teachers and friends, can help her son develop a positive image of himself as a man. She also thinks that traditional masculine expectations tend to be unrealized in his upbringing and that contact with "swishy faggots" can help in this respect. Nevertheless, she still sees the identity of the father as knowledge worth having, though she frames the potential importance of this in terms of a biological imperative to know one's "roots."

She is clearly talking more about a kind of social entitlement that the child of an anonymous donor can never have.

The anonymity of the donor and the absence of a known social father are clearly separate issues for these mothers. At the same time, mothers who conceive in this way share with mothers who know their children's fathers a sense of responsibility for their absence. Just as a mother is obliged to provide a father, or try to provide one, she feels responsible for the anonymity of a donor.

For lesbian mothers whose children were born outside of marriage, decisions about how to deal with the child's father can be complicated by the legal intricacies of the welfare system. Evelyn Brandon, whose
three-month-old baby was fathered by a man with whom she had a serious relationship, hesitate to apply for AFDC because she would have to identify him.

If I decide to apply for cash from the state, one, they will go to Robert for child support, two, I will be taking what I consider essentially to be welfare. And that's sort of against who I want to be, my pride is. And I just feel bad about taking the medical aid and help for things like food. But I do have three grandchildren, essentially for no reason other than being gone, bothers me. Because I feel I should be able to find some other alternative, such as ... (providing) child care in my home.

Evelyn interprets Robert's erratic behavior in recent months to guilt over fathering a child out of wedlock and failing to offer financial support. But Evelyn doesn't blame him, explaining that since she made the decision to have the baby, she should assume the financial obligations associated with the decision. Now that she's had the baby for three months, however, she has begun to wonder whether this was the right decision, expenses have been mounting and her health insurance, still in effect from her previous job, did not pay all the costs of prenatal and obstetrical care. Her lover is largely supporting her now, supplementing the disability payments Evelyn receives because of a problem secondary to the pregnancy and the government commodities she qualifies for because of her low income.

Formerly Married Mothers

Lesbians whose children were born during marriages vary widely in the extent of their ongoing relationships with their former husbands. Expectations related to the outcome of divorce proceedings may enter the picture, and concerns over custody emerge as significant determinants of the way mothers organize these links. Children are more likely than those whose parents were never married to know their fathers and to have expectations of their own about their behavior and commitment. This children's expectations and desires because part of what mothers express, along with their own often complicated feelings about the sons to whom they were once married.
Lesbian Mothers

Some mothers’ accounts seem to frame fathers’ contributions to their children’s development strictly as an economic arrangement. But while reliable payment of child support and willingness to provide for their children’s special needs may make the difference between continual financial stress and the ability to maintain one’s accustomed living standard, financial support is rarely evaluated solely in material terms. Doris Johnson, a mother of two, makes it clear that she is concerned about more than financial imperatives.

Were it not for money and the child support thing, I probably would have really told him a long time ago—just told him to go jump, and it could be free if I didn’t see him again, ever, or hear from him again, ever. But with the kids, I don’t feel like I can do that. I know that I maintain a certain kind of pleasantness, probably with an edge to it, because he’s totally capable of never paying another cent. Then, in some ways, it’s the only tie to the kids. . . . But I don’t want to be responsible for severing that line.

These comments point to a significant aspect of mothers’ relationships with former husbands: their feeling that their performance, rather than the father’s, is on the line with respect to his behavior toward the children. Mothers view themselves as bearing total, or nearly total, responsibility for the child’s ongoing ties with the father; it is they who will be seen to have failed, rather than the fathers, should these relationships be disrupted.

Margo Adler has also come to view the minimal child support she receives as the only indication her developmentally disabled daughter has of her father’s commitment to her. Although her former husband, Gene, is well-off financially, he reduced her child support from $100 a week to $50 after she moved to California. Margo knows it would be difficult to get a better arrangement from the court; Gene has found ways to conceal his assets and can better afford the legal expenses that would be involved by returning to court.

Margo has a good job now, so she pays the child support in a separate account and uses it only for child-care expenses. She has also charged some of Amy’s medical bills to Gene, and she assures that he has paid them, since she has heard nothing further from the doctor. She writes Gene regularly with news about Amy, particularly
about her serious medical problems. But he does not write back to either of them.

Apart from the weekly checks, then, neither Margo nor Amy has had real contact with Gene for about eight years, since Margo moved from the East Coast to California. Now that Amy has started writing, she has tried to establish a relationship with her father, but he has met with no success.

She wrote him this little kiddie letter, in little kiddie handwriting. I mailed it to him, and he totally ignored it. Which I thought was a really heavy thing to do, but on the other hand, if he’s going to do that, just as well that he does it totally.

Margo knows that he has made numerous business trips to the Bay Area, as a mutual friend once ran into him on a plane, but he has never made contact with her during any of these visits.

Interviewer: So he could visit if he wanted to?

Margo: Yeah. But he chooses not to. It’s kind of weird, because he always felt that his father only gave money and never really was there for him, didn’t take him fishing, this and that, like the other kids. And it turned out that in this case, it’s the most blatant example of that that you could possibly be. All he does give is money, in his case.

Fathers’ financial contributions to the family, when they are in fact forthcoming and when they are more than symbolic payments, can make the difference between strict economizing and a more comfortable standard of living. Fathers who cooperate with arrangements for visits, holidays, and summer camps may relieve mothers of total responsibility, allowing them to take vacations and to have more personal privacy. But as both Doris and Margo’s comments indicate, material support may come to represent instead the father’s continuing emotional commitment to his children, evidence that he still cares even when he rarely visits or calls.

Fathers as friends

Continued interaction with the child’s father is most likely to be possible when the mother has a cordial relationship with him. Con-
Lesbia n Mothers

continued friendliness does not appear to be the most common result of the breakup of a marriage, yet some lesbian mothers express great affection for their former husbands. Rebecca Collins, who enjoys extremely harmonious ties to her family, as we saw earlier, has a similarly positive story to tell about her ongoing relationship with Paul, her former husband. Rebecca and Paul have never been legally divorced, although four years have passed since, as Rebecca explains, she instigated their breakup by having an affair with another man. Her reasons for being dissatisfied with the marriage are difficult to pin down; she feels feeling "frustrated" and not feeling that the marriage allowed her "choices."

She came out as a lesbian not long after the marriage ended when she and Sheila Ryan, then a co-worker, began their relationship. The first person she told about her new relationship was, in fact, Paul, who, she says, "was really excited and accepted it."

I'd definitely say [our relationship] is friendly. It's close in terms of how close I am right now to any man. I feel I can talk to him about almost anything.

Her decision to confide in Paul about this matter is very much in line with the friendly relationship she has maintained with him, strengthened, she believes, by their mutual concern for their son. Rebecca sees the tie to their son as essential to the maintenance of this relationship, without which she would have no reason to sustain it. As it is, Paul has continued to join Rebecca with her parents, her brothers, and her lover for summer vacations in the mountains.

Other lesbian mothers, too, still feel close to their former husbands. Tanya Petroff separated from Bill when their daughter was still a baby. He now lives in Denver, so that actual contact between them is not very frequent. Nevertheless, Tanya sees the link to Bill as permanent.

I'll tell you [a] relationship which has to do with the fact that we have a long history together. I have a longer history with him than I do with anyone outside my family... He calls me when there's changes in his work, like when he gets a promotion or something. Like I'm the only person who understands the work that went into that... I like the relationship we have now. I can't be
Life with Father

I'd like to have more of it than we have, although maybe then it wouldn't be as nice.

Tanya and Bill talk at length on the phone several times a month. Unlike Rebecca and Paul, whose relationship revolves around their child, Tanya and Bill spend relatively little time actually discussing their daughter. Rather, they engage in personal conversations she calls "maintenance," by which, she explains, "we reprocess our lives," discussing ongoing issues that require decisions concerning both their daughter and themselves. She also sees him at least once a year for a few days when she goes to pick up their daughter after summer and Christmas visits. In addition, Bill flies out to the Bay Area every few months to visit them.

Because they share decision making, Tanya can expect help from him when she needs it. Most recently he lent Tanya a substantial amount of money, about half of what she needed for the down payment on a modest house. This is not an isolated incident; Tanya has lent Bill money on several occasions.

So I feel I have a real long-lasting relationship with him. We have a lot of differences, but I respect a lot of the knowledge that he has... He's becoming a very responsible man and to that I'm taking some of the weight off me.

Friendly connections with former husbands are not always so easy to establish. When Deborah Cohen's ex-husband, Steve, found out after their divorce that she had become a lesbian, he was very upset and threatened to put their daughter in a boarding school to get her away from Deborah's influence. His concerns, however, were finally assuaged. Deborah talked to him as length and somewhere calmed him down. He never followed through on any of his threats.

He was a little uncomfortable, but... last few years he's been very friendly. He keeps asking me when a great mother I am, and he's real proud of our daughter (and says all those good things. It's incredible—I get a lot of support from him. I get Mother's Day cards from him.

Steve moved to Southern California several years ago. Their daughter, Pam, is now old enough to fly down alone, and does so...
Lesbian Mothers

about once a month, for one month in the summer, and for some holidays. Steve pays a substantial amount of child support and is extremely reliable about meeting this obligation. Although Deborah feels that Steve's present (large) income would permit him to pay more, she is basically satisfied with the arrangement.

She does have some problems with Steve's affluence, though. He lives on a rather extravagant scale, and Deborah is concerned about its effect on Pam. She worries that Pam will be "seduced" by Steve's lifestyle and that she will become dissatisfied with Deborah's more modest standard of living. She explains that Pam seems dazzled by the splendor of her father's life; when she returns from visits she talks at length about the things he bought for her.

Despite these concerns, Deborah describes her relationship with Steve in strikingly positive language. Through their ties revolving around Pam, they tend to engage in what she considers polite conversation on other topics: his job, her job, their relatives, and so forth. He has been remarried for a couple of years, and she likes his new wife. Most important, Deborah places Steve at the core of her support system, particularly with respect to financial needs.

He's there. If I ever need extra money, he is there. If I'm in trouble, he's there. That feels good.

The emotional intensity of some women's ties to their husbands carries over even after the marriages have ceased to be viable. Nora Olson, a mother of four now in a relationship with another lesbian mother, continues to see her relationship with her former husband, Sam, as close and trusting. She views the collapse of the marriage as less connected to anything specific about them than to the effects of the roles they felt they ought to play.

It began to end because we had married each other with these ideas about roles and we were both very committed to those roles . . . . But my ex-husband is a really nice person. I like him a lot, and we're still very close friends. He tried very hard to make changes with me so that I wouldn't feel so oppressed and that I wouldn't be so wifely, but it's kind of like the patterns were set from the beginning and I couldn't stop.
Life with Father

Despite their break-up, Nora feels that her fifteen years of marriage to Sam have laid the foundation for a continuing and caring relationship.

I really like him. . . . He's been a real close friend of mine for like twenty-five years and it's hard to give up those kinds of relationships. It's real painful. We've shared a lot of really good stuff. He's really a part of my life and it's just very painful. . . . I know I do not want to be married to him [but] it's still real painful to think of the divorce and finality.

Since they separated, Nora and Sam have continued to live in the same neighborhood and have worked out a rotating joint custody arrangement by which their children migrate daily between the two households. This system has remained viable partly because Sam's large income (he is a pediatrician) has allowed them to equip both of their homes with everything their children need and for him to manage most of the children's expenses while Nora is attending college. Sam knows that Nora is a lesbian, and though he sometimes fears she may do something to embarrass him, he has few real concerns, as "the liberal part of him really thinks it's cool having a gay wife."

More frequently, of course, interactions with fathers focus more on wresting court-ordered child support and other demonstrations of concern from unwilling men than on reaping the benefits of their assistance. Our legal system makes mothers responsible for collecting child support, for enforcing visitation arrangements, and in general, for sustaining children's relationships with their fathers. Paradoxically, then, the extent of the father's contact with the children represents a test of her commitment and devotion rather than his. This responsibility is intensified by the legal obligations she must meet as the person who has physical custody of the children.

Being a Good Mother: Providing a Father

Lesbian mothers' accounts of their relationships with their children's fathers, whether they are their former husbands or not, vary dramatically. Mothers may choose to emphasize the frequency of contact fathers have with children, or the type of contact—whether
Lesbian Mothers

the father has a meaningful parental role or is merely their children’s weekend destination. Some fathers are noteworthy for their willingness to provide reliable financial support; others are important mainly as sources of irritation and failed expectations. Some mothers talk of their continuing affections for their ex-husbands while others speak of ongoing mutual antagonism.

These narratives highlight two important aspects of the way lesbians negotiate their identities as mothers. First, they point to their tendency to assume that they alone are responsible for all aspects of their children’s welfare, even those that stem from the fathers’ behavior. Since the fathers’ actions are generally beyond the mother’s control, their efforts are often doomed to frustration.

Second, they reveal mothers’ continuing commitment to the belief that fathers are vital influences in their children’s lives. Most mothers assume that fathers have a contribution to make to their children’s development that only they can make. They tend to frame their discussions of this issue in terms of the “biological” foundation of ties between children and their fathers. But in casting these relationships as rooted in biology, and by implication as “natural,” mothers de-emphasize that fathers provide children with a “normal family,” something they cannot offer by themselves.

These two themes—the father’s importance and the mother’s responsibility for making him a part of her children’s experience—emerge as central to the ways mothers define motherhood and attempt to establish a claim to the goodness they associate with it. These claims become even more elaborate when the fathers seek custody of the children and the mothers must prove their worthiness as parents in a public arena.