

## FAMILY

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# A baby daddy is no daddy in the eyes of the law



**Dirty Laundry** • Unmarried fathers-to-be need to file suit to ensure parental rights.

Yesterday's deadbeat dad is today's babydaddy.

But while "deadbeat" was clearly a label to be avoided, there seems to be little stigma attached to being a babydaddy — or baby-mama. Some can be engaged and loving parents, but others have skipped out on in-the-trenches parenting.

They know how to make a baby but have no interest in the sustained commitment required to raise one. And all of a sudden, gross negligence is a lifestyle choice.

Brad and Angelina may be glamorizing out-of-wedlock parenting, but at least both of

them appear to be involved parents.

I'm sure the Jolie-Pitt household would have plenty of legal back-up if their living situation changed.

But some men, who take fatherhood seriously, may be in for a shock if their relationship with a baby's mother changes.

Jesiah Escoffier, 26, says he has been a full-time father to his 6-year-old daughter, Clarissa, since she was 7 months old. He never married Clarissa's mother. When his ex-girlfriend said she wanted custody of their daughter, he filed a paternity suit.

"I was practically bawling

on the phone," he said, when he talked to his attorney, Kirk Stange. He couldn't afford to pay child support and wanted to keep her full-time.

"She's the reason I do anything and everything," he said.

In these cases, however, the deck is stacked against fathers. The mother has sole legal and physical custody of the child — until a court order establishes otherwise. In some ways, this bias in the law is understandable: Only the mother's biological connection to a child is evident; a father's can be contested.

But given the rise in out-of-wedlock births and cohabitating

couples, perhaps the law should give greater weight to who actually raises the child. Those who disappear when a child infringes on their good time and show up at holidays are not fooling anyone — least of all, their children.

Jesiah won full custody of his daughter. He became a father when he was 18 years old, when he discovered his girlfriend was pregnant and says he worked three jobs.

"I was in love with the fact that I was going to be a dad," he said.

He's learned what it takes to raise a child: "Being a parent is very, very self-sacrificing. You have to be willing to give up the

things you want to do and learn to enjoy the things your kids want to do."

The Stange Law firm, with offices in Brentwood and St. Charles, recently hosted a seminar at a West County sports bar for unmarried fathers-to-be. They offered a spread of buffalo wings and onion rings. They showed a PowerPoint presentation explaining to unmarried expectant fathers the cold reality of legal fights and child support payments. It was a chance for men to start thinking like fathers. They expected about a dozen men to attend.

Only three showed up.