

The Impact of Fathers on Children's Well-Being¹

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Introduction

American families have changed dramatically over the last century. Currently, about one half of all children in the United States will live apart from their fathers some time during their childhood because their parents have separated (Smith, n.d.). Of all children born in the year 2000 to married parents, 50 percent will experience the divorce of their parents before they reach their 18th birthday (Fagan, 2000). In addition, the proportion of births to unmarried women has increased greatly in recent decades, rising from 5 percent in 1960 to 41 percent in 2011 (Child Trend Data Bank, 2013).

While these statistics are shocking, a father who is absent from the child's household may not necessarily be absent from his child's life. Father involvement depends on a number of circumstances, such as marital status at the time of separation, legal status, and socioeconomic status (Cowan, Cowan, & Knox, 2010). Research shows that children benefit from fathers who foster close attachments with them and maintain an active presence in their lives (Allen & Daly, 2007).

This publication provides a brief summary of the history of fatherhood in America and discusses the importance of involved fathers, and how mothers, other family members, and adult role models can make a positive impact in a child's life.

Helpful Information

The Historical Role of Fathers in America

The role of fathers in society has undergone several shifts throughout recent history. Historically the influence of fathers in their child's life has been ignored by the media and behavioral scientists (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). The structure and function of the family shifted in the 1800s and 1900s as social, economic, and technical changes in society emerged. Prior to the 1960s and 1970s many behavioral scientists assumed that fathers were relatively unimportant for the healthy development of their children (Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth & Lamb, 2000; Nash, 1965; Rapoport, Rapoport, Strelitz & Kew, 1977). In the 1960s, as mothers joined the workforce and fathers became more involved with caring for children, researchers began to take note of the role a father's love plays in the psychological and behavioral adjustment of children (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). In fact, numerous studies conducted since the 1990s suggest that a father's love is closely associated with a child's development, psychological well-being, health, and an array of psychological and behavioral issues ranging from emotional stability and academic performance to drug use and other risky behaviors (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001).

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The Overall Impact of Fathers (and Others) in the Home

FATHERS' INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN'S OVERALL HEALTH AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Although the role of fathers has changed historically over the years, fathers can play a crucial role in the healthy development and well-being of their children, beginning as early as birth. For example, fathers tend to play with their children differently than mothers do. Mothers often emphasize nurturing while fathers spend more time engaging in stimulating playful activity and promoting independence (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). Research has found that early positive father-child interactions can reduce cognitive delay of infants (Bronte-Tinkew, 2008). Father involvement can also improve weight gain in preterm infants and boost early language skills (Garfield & Isacco, 2006; Allen & Daly, 2007).

When fathers are involved in children's lives at a young age, toddlers develop greater abilities to start school with higher levels of academic readiness (Allen & Daly, 2007). Throughout development, high levels of father involvement have also been associated with greater child tendencies to be more patient and increased aptitudes for handling the ongoing stressors associated with schooling when compared to children with fathers who are less involved (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). Developmentally, children with involved fathers are also less likely to drop out of school, act out in school, and/or engage in risky behaviors in adolescence, thus highlighting the notable effect that a father can have on a child's academic well-being (Anthes, 2010; United Fathers of California, n.d.).

FATHERS' INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN'S EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING AND DEVELOPMENT

In addition to the increased overall health and cognitive development experienced by children when fathers are present and involved, a father also can impact a child's emotional and psychological well-being. For example, infants who receive high affection from their fathers have a tendency to be more securely attached, enabling them to more freely explore their environment when a parent is close by, as well as to more readily accept comfort from their parent after being briefly separated. As these children become older, they also are more likely to have better social connections with their peers. Fathers can also help promote a child's independence, sense of self, and a positive lens through which they can view the outside world (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006).

Fathers impact children of each gender in unique ways. How fathers treat the opposite sex, regulate their emotions, and model a work ethic all play a role in shaping their children's attitudes toward romantic relationships, peer relationships, school, and work (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). For young boys, fathers can provide the answers to questions of approval and validation that a young boy may seek. For young girls, fathers can help them meet their need to be seen as desired and valuable (Hunt, 2010). When young men and young women do not feel safe and secure in these deep-rooted psychological areas of development, both can become more predisposed to seek these affirmations elsewhere.

With regard to sexual behavior, researchers have found that adolescents from single-parent families are more likely to engage in earlier and more frequent sexual activity (Metzler, Noell, Bigan, Ary, & Smolkowski, 1994). The absence of a father in a teenage girl's life, in particular, is the number one predictor of sexual risk-taking. In fact, studies indicate that 71 percent of early pregnancies occur among women raised in fatherless households (Hunt, 2010).

Additional studies suggest that the concept of "rough-housing" with a father can help teach children how to properly handle aggressive impulses as well as engage in physical contact without losing emotional control. Consequently, these children tend to be more self-regulated, sociable, and popular with other children throughout their early childhood and teenage years. Additionally, children possessing a good relationship with their fathers are more likely to avoid violence, delinquent and disruptive behavior, and drugs (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). Ultimately, children with fathers present are more likely to exhibit pro-social behavior.

BENEFITS OF FATHERS AND MOTHERS AS CO-PARENTS

One of the best predictors of a child's emotional and social well-being is the quality of parenting, no matter what the family structure is. When parents have a cooperative co-parental relationship, where they agree on the rules and support each other's decisions, children tend to realize parental authority is not inconsistent and they generally thrive. This consistency among the parents helps the children learn and incorporate social norms and morals. A positive co-parental relationship between mother and father serves as a good model for children who learn these skills through observation and, in turn, these children can use them to develop positive relationships with peers (Amato, 2005).

The father's relationship with the child's mother is critical to a child's well-being. Fathers who treat their children's mothers in a respectful manner and who handle relationship conflict in an appropriate and adult way are more likely to have sons who understand how they should treat the opposite sex. Consequently, these male children are less likely to act aggressively toward females. This positive relationship also benefits daughters because it allows them to see how they should expect to be treated by men. Girls who have involved, respectful fathers are also less likely to be involved in unhealthy or violent relationships (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). Ultimately, a father who develops and maintains a positive relationship with the mother of his children has a greater tendency to be involved and spend time with his children and, therefore, develop children with healthier psychological and emotional well-being (2006).

KINSHIP

Kinship networks are important in providing support for children, especially when fathers are uninvolved. It is important to consider that fatherlessness and its effects are cyclical; many fathers do not know how to actively father their children because they themselves were not fathered. Extended family or kin, such as grandparents and other relatives, can wield a positive influence on children's well-being. Active relationships with adult male relatives, such as an uncle or grandfather, can be especially important for the academic success of boys in single-parent households (Coley, 1998). A kin role model is more likely to understand and appreciate the child's culture and family history and, because they are generally less emotionally involved than a parent, can offer direction for specific skills or potential careers (Southwick, Morgan III, Vythilingam, & Charney, 2001).

MENTORS

The father's role is distinct and is not easily replaced. However, research indicates that children who have a non-paternal man in their life—a man who plays a significant role in their behavior management and discipline—have better conduct and peer relationships (Coley, 1998). Mentors can provide support, teach skills, inspire, and help build self-esteem. Children with natural mentors such as a teacher, coach, or minister exhibit a more positive attitude towards school and fewer problem behaviors and are less likely to use marijuana and other drugs (Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002).

Things You Can Use Practical Programs that Work EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAMS:

There are many programs and non-profit organizations that can provide mentorship to a child in need of a positive role model. Currently, there are approximately 370 agencies supporting over 250,000 children typically considered at-risk. Many of these organizations are structured to help encourage and mentor children as they transition into adulthood. An example of one of these programs is Big Brothers Big Sisters (BBBS), the United States' largest and most-effective youth-mentoring organization. The mission of BBBS is to help children realize their potential and build their futures. In BBBS, children are paired with adult role models, creating positive relationships that can have a direct and lasting effect on the child's life. Having someone to spend time with and look up to can create positive change in the life of a child, and organizations like BBBS have proven to be effective. For example, in one study, researchers found that after 18 months of a child spending time with their mentor they were 46 percent less likely to begin using illegal drugs, 27 percent less likely to begin using alcohol, 52 percent less likely to skip school, 37 percent less likely to skip a class, and 33 percent less likely to hit someone (Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, 2014). Clearly, the role of a mentor can transcend behavioral, educational, and socio-emotional obstacles that a child may be facing. Other national programs with similar missions include Take Stock in Children and Junior Achievement.

EVIDENCE-BASED FATHERHOOD-SPECIFIC PROGRAMS:

National Fatherhood Initiative is a nonprofit origination founded with the goal of improving children's well-being by increasing the amount of children who have fathers in their lives who are involved, responsible, and committed. This organization sponsors a variety of evidence-based fatherhood programs and resources, including community-based, corrections, and military offerings.

- Community-based fatherhood programs are designed for fathers in the community to increase father involvement, improve child well-being, improve child welfare, improve child health, address poverty and crime, and address substance abuse and mental health. Resources include 24/7 Dad, Father Friendly Check-up, Doctor Dad Workshop, Father Topics Workshops, New Dad Pocket Guide, and the Help Me Grow Guides. Please see additional resources below.

- Corrections-based fatherhood programs also include programs for short-stay facilities. They are designed for incarcerated fathers to address criminogenic needs, reduce recidivism, promote successful reentry, be sustainable, and help maintain facility safety and order. Resources include The InsideOut Dad Program, Inside-Out Guide to Family Ties, How to Create a Reentry Plan, Staying Involved with your Children While Incarcerated, and 20 Ways to Connect with your Children and Family After Release. Please see additional resources below.
- Military fatherhood programs are designed for military families to help build family resilience; address deployment and reintegration issues; reduce child abuse and domestic violence; manage anger, depression, and stress; and conduct effective home visitations. Resources include Deployed Fathers and Families Guide, Military Dads Pocket Guide, 10 Ways to Stay Involved with your Children During Deployment, and Power of Spirituality in Fatherhood. Please see additional resources below.

State and local agencies can partner with the National Fatherhood Initiative to develop programs that are customized, affordable, manageable, and can be evaluated. The National Fatherhood Initiative also can provide printed materials, workshops, curricula, and technical assistance. Visit Fatherhood.org to learn more about the programs available and to access a variety of free resources.

GEORGIA'S FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS:

- In 1997 Georgia's Division of Child Support Services (DCSS) created the Georgia Fatherhood Program, the largest state-operated fatherhood program in the country. This program works with non-custodial parents, both fathers and mothers, who lack the ability to pay their owed child support. The state understands that most non-custodial parents want to pay their court-ordered child support, but may lack the economic ability to do so. As part of this program, DCSS has partnered with many government and community agencies to develop a network of services to assist these parents to overcome barriers preventing them from paying their court-ordered child support on a consistent basis. Completion of this program takes three to nine months. Enrolled participants are required to pay child support, attend workshops, look for employment, and further their education.

Tracking Involved-Father Behaviors

Tracking how we are regularly interacting with our children is a good way to measure our commitment and involvement with our children. Table 1 offers fathers a method to help them do just that. At the end of each day, they should take a moment and put a "+" or a "-" next to each behavior to track how well they did with each. They may want to set a goal in each area and see if they can improve on it each week. Keeping their tracking chart in an easily accessible location will remind them how they are doing.

Table 1. Father Involvement Tracking Chart:

Target Behavior	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Spend quality time together							
Show love and affection							
Talk to child							
Read to child							
Play together							
Pay child support on time							
Help with homework							
Communicate positively with child's mother							
Act as a good role model							
Provide appropriate discipline							
TOTALS							

Additional Resources:

Big Brothers Big Sisters <http://www.bbbs.org/>

Practical Strategies for Fathers and Stakeholders to Improve Fathers' Involvement: <http://www2.ed.gov/pubs/parents/calltocommit/chap2.html>

National Fatherhood Initiative: <http://www.fatherhood.org>

National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse: <http://www.fatherhood.gov/>

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