

Fathers are Critical to Child Well-Being

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Fathers play a critical role in the well-being of their children. An abundance of research in recent years has been definitive in underscoring that fathers have a distinct, necessary, and irreplaceable role to play in child development. Fathers bring a uniquely masculine quality to parenting. Fathers and mothers are not interchangeable.

Yet, one of the difficult challenges contemporary families and communities face is the "epidemic" of fatherlessness, or father absence. Over one-third of the nation's children (36.3%) live without their biological fathers. Twenty-eight percent of children live in single-parent homes, up from 9% in 1960. There is an astounding increase in children living with never-married mothers, growing from 221,000 in 1960 to 5,862,000 in 1995. And, in addition to these sobering statistics, there are unknown numbers of children who live in homes where father is present, but physically and/or emotionally unavailable to them.

Two major contributors to this dramatic phenomenon of father absence are the extremely high divorce rate and the increasing number of children being born out of wedlock. There were four times as many currently divorced people in the USA in 1995 as there were in 1970. In 1994, one-third of all newborns were born out of wedlock. Oklahoma has one of the highest divorce rates in the nation, and compares poorly with most other states in births to unwed mothers. The 2000 publication of the *Kids Count Data Book: State Profiles of Child Well-Being* ranks Oklahoma 37th among states in the teen birth rate.

Research now gives a clear picture of the consequences for children who do not have the benefit of a caring and involved father. The consequences impact us all. Children without fathers are:

- Fifty percent more likely to drop out of school, use drugs and alcohol, join gangs, and commit crimes. (Consuer, et.al.)
- Three to five times as likely to be involved in out-of-wedlock pregnancy. (Whitehead)
- Two to three times as likely to have emotional and behavioral problems. (USDHHS health survey)
- More likely to commit suicide.
- More likely to have illnesses and physical problems. (Hong)

In addition, research compiled by the National Fatherhood Initiative indicates 60 percent of America's rapists, 72 percent of adolescent murderers, and 70 percent of long-term prison inmates come from fatherless homes.

Children who live absent their biological fathers, on the average, are more likely to be poor; have more illnesses; have difficulty maintaining healthy relationships; experience educational, emotional and psychological problems; be victims of child abuse; and engage in criminal behavior than their peers who live with their married, biological mother and father. These consequences carry over into adulthood and the cycle is perpetuated.

The research is also in on the benefits of a father's involvement with his children.

- Longitudinal studies have found that children who have a strong attachment and are consistently involved with their fathers have better self esteem, a greater sense of competence, and better intellectual development and academic success.

- Father-child interaction has been shown to promote a child's physical well-being, perceptual abilities and competency for relatedness with others, even at a young age (Krampe and Fairweather, 1993).
- The development of empathy, clear values, and the ability to inhibit aggression are also highly correlated to father involvement. In a 26-year longitudinal study on 379 individuals, researchers found that the single most important childhood factor in developing empathy is paternal involvement. Fathers who spent time alone with their kids performing routine childcare at least two times a week, raised children who were the most compassionate adults. (Koestner, et.al)

In order to ensure the well-being of children, health professionals have a responsibility and an important role in supporting and encouraging meaningful father involvement. This often requires a concerted effort since there are numerous cultural barriers to active father involvement, particularly with young children. Some of these include:

- Economic and societal barriers. There is a historical attitude that father's primary role is of breadwinner, providing economic support for the family. There is much less societal precedent for expecting fathers to play the critical role of providing daily care, nurturing, and emotional support for children. When fathers are unable to provide economically or see little economic potential, they may choose not to invest emotionally in a family they cannot support. There is increasing evidence, however, that fathers who can be successfully engaged in their baby's life early and supported in their role as fathers may find new motivation to seek educational and financial achievement.
- The decline of enduring marriages. There is considerable debate about how to restore vitality to the institution of marriage without demoralizing single parents. With the mounting evidence of the impact of disrupted families on children, it is a challenge to

find ways to support intact, continuous relationships between a child and both parents in the context of broken marriages.

- Men are often not socialized to parent. Many men report that signs of tenderness were discouraged in their youth, and they were taught to “be tough.” A lack of role models for males as nurturers, educators or providers of daily child care has resulted in a lack of skill and knowledge about how to be nurturing and engaged in relationships with their children. For men who were fatherless themselves, or men who have unresolved problems in relationship with their own fathers, this is even more difficult.
- Women can be barriers. In general, women are the gatekeepers for their children’s relationships. Unfortunately, sometimes it is necessary for mothers to deny access to fathers in order to protect their children from abuse. At other times, women may discourage their husband’s attempts at childcare through criticism, such as complaining he doesn’t change the diaper “right.” And sometimes, at great cost to a child’s well-being, mothers, as well as fathers, use their children as pawns in their adult battles, particularly after divorce.
- Professionals act as if “parent” is synonymous with mother. Fathers report feeling “left out” from the minute their child is born as health care providers and others actively engage mothers, but not fathers. This professional disregard of the father’s vital role, as well as his feelings, often begins even in the stages of prenatal care. In the workplace, fathers often feel stigmatized if they stay home with a sick child or a new baby. It appears to be much more acceptable for their female counterparts to take that responsibility.

Health care professionals are in a key position to influence healthy attachments between fathers and their children. Providers at all levels can support father involvement and encourage nurturing father-child relationships by:

- Expecting fathers to participate. In a study of the emotional experiences of 75 new fathers from intact families with babies 3 to 12 months of age, results show that being intimately involved in the birthing process, as well as being involved in pre- and post-natal care, reinforces the father's attachment to the newborn, enables him to give the infant excessive love, and enhances the father's self esteem and sense of familial worth. (Hyman, J.P).

Professionals can demonstrate regard for fathers by including both parents in activities as much as possible, and encouraging both parents to share in interactions with their children. Of course, discretion must be used when working with families in which separation exists for the protection of family members.

- Do extra outreach. Ask fathers to come to appointments, participate in educational activities or health programs. Discuss their importance to the growth, development, and health of their child.
- Create a father-friendly environment. Make sure that furnishings, photographs on the walls or in brochures and other available reading materials are inclusive of fathers. Men are unlikely to feel comfortable, let alone welcome in an environment that is designed especially for women and children.
- Make fathers feel as necessary as they are. Recognize and educate fathers to the unique and critical role they have in the healthy development of their children. Sponsor father-child activities or support groups for fathers that are designed to meet their needs.

For more information on father involvement, or parenting in general, contact your local county health department Child Guidance Program, or call the Child Guidance Service, Oklahoma State Department of Health, , (405) 271-4470.

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