

## Out of Site But Not Out of Mind: The Harmful Absence of Men

by Bruce Cunningham and Bernie Dorsey

Over the years we have spoken on the topic of male involvement at many conferences, workshops, and staff meetings. We are often asked a variety of questions on how to involve fathers and other men in the lives of children. Recently, we were asked a particularly intriguing question by the director of a child care center.

In this situation, a single father enrolled his child in the director's child care center. When the father was asked about the child's mother he replied that the mother was "not in the picture." This alone is not so unusual because approximately 20% of single parents are fathers according to U.S. Census Bureau statistics. What was unusual was the staffing at the child care center. The classroom into which the child entered had a man as the teacher and another man as the teacher assistant.

The director describing this situation felt the quality of care in the classroom was very good and did not doubt that the child would be well cared for. Yet the questions asked of us were, "Doesn't this child need to be around women? Won't the child be deprived if raised only around men? Won't the child only learn about women from distorted images in the media? And what if the father is saying uncomplimentary things

about the mother — won't that damage this child's view of women now and later in life?"

The person asking these questions was genuinely concerned, and the questions were remarkable. Remarkable not for what they asked, but for what they didn't ask about the more common absence of men in the lives of children. It is much more common in early childhood programs that a single mother enrolls a child. It is more common that no one inquires about the presence of a father or other man in that child's life. It is more common that the child's teachers and caregivers will all be women. The number of men teaching in pre-kindergarten programs is estimated by a recent survey of National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) to be about 3%. The number of men teaching in elementary grades is estimated by the National Education Association for Elementary Teachers to be 13%, with most of these found in the fifth and sixth grades.

Furthermore, it is more common that the child will learn a good deal of what they know about men from television and other media sources. A 1999 study by the National Fatherhood Initiative found that television programs seldom featured fathers and when they did, fathers were likely to be portrayed as a competent man yet uninvolved father or an involved father yet an incompetent man. Another 1999 study, "Boys to Men: Media Messages About Masculinity" by the advocacy group Children Now, found that television programs most often portrayed men as violent and angry and rarely showed men in nurturing or home life situations.

The director who asked the questions during the training was correct in that children are strongly influenced by the experiences they have over time. She was right that children need men and women in their lives. And she was reassured to hear that the child in this situation will have positive personal experiences with women — if not in the child care center then certainly later on in school.



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Bernie Dorsey is the founder of Conscious Fathering Programs. His "Skills for New Dads" hospital based program has graduated over 3,000 men in the Puget Sound area and in addition, over 11,000 of *Bernie's Guide for Expectant Fathers* have been distributed statewide. Bernie is also one of the recipients of the Governor's 2002 Award for Advocacy of Child Abuse Prevention. As a member of the Leadership Group for the Washington State Fathering Coalition, Bernie continues to work at encouraging parentally balanced programs for families.

Unfortunately, many children do not have men as positive role models while growing up. Many children do not get the benefits in intellectual development and social competence that an involved man contributes. According to a 1999 Child Trends Research Brief, these contributions come through parenting and play styles of fathers that are unique from those of mothers. It is not reassuring that children are being harmed by this absence of men.

To address this more common situation, child care centers can take the following actions:

- Shift your view from fathers (which tends to connote the biological father only) to fathering (men who nurture children including biological fathers). The biological father plays a critical role in our culture, in the lives of children, and in the importance of knowing about the genetic influences in your own family health history. Yet many men can fulfill the nurturing role of fathering by being that positive man in the life of a child.
- Help each family identify a man for each child at the time of enrollment. This can be the biological father, a step-father, a grandfather, uncle, or family friend. Any man who has a positive relationship with a child can build on that relationship to benefit the child.
- Inform families of your center philosophy that children already have both men and women who are already involved in their lives. Identify, reach out, and support these adults in their involvement with their child. Make your expectations clear that both parents — or a man and a woman — are expected to participate in center activities such as parent conferences.
- Send program information to the men. A man can be involved with a child only when he knows what is going on in the life of that child. Early childhood programs can communicate much through newsletters, by talking with men, and by personally inviting men to attend parent and family events.
- Recruit men into the program as staff and regular volunteers. Many men, from high school students to senior citizens, enjoy spending time with young children and will do so if asked and welcomed.
- Inform men about special programs for new dads even if they are already a father. A growing number of these programs, such as Boot Camp for New Dads and

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Conscious Fathering reach men through childbirth classes. These programs offer information tailored to men at a highly teachable moment, even if the child to be born is not their first.

While men are often out of child care sites, they are seldom out of the minds of children. These actions can help child care programs connect more children with men. As a result, we will have strong programs for families and better lives for children.

### Resources to support directors, staff, and families

- Boot Camp for New Dads  
[www.newdads.com](http://www.newdads.com)
- Child Trends  
[www.childtrends.org](http://www.childtrends.org)
- Children Now  
[www.childrennow.org](http://www.childrennow.org)
- Conscious Fathering Programs  
[www.helpfordads.com](http://www.helpfordads.com)
- National Fatherhood Initiative  
[www.fatherhood.org](http://www.fatherhood.org)
- National Association for the Education of Young Children  
[www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)  
(printed brochures *Involving Men in the Lives of Children*, order #593 and *Careers for Men in Early Childhood Education*, order #594)