

Reprinted with permission from Exchange magazine.
Visit us at www.ChildCareExchange.com or call (800) 221-2864.
Multiple use copy agreement available for educators by request.

The importance of fathers in the lives of their children

by Christophe Beard

One of the most significant changes to have occurred in the family structure over the past few decades has been the increased number of children living in father-absent households. Nationally, over 24 million children, or one out of every three, are living in a home without their biological father. Surprisingly, the general public seems to be largely unaware of the true scope of the problem. The issue is better known, perhaps, at the local level where fathers are a rare sight in the family-focused programs of community-based organizations. Unfortunately, most participants are mothers struggling to make ends meet without the help of their children's father. Although most parents would agree that children are better served when their biological father is actively involved in their lives, getting fathers involved has proven to be the greatest challenge of them all. Even though child development experts will tell you that men by their very nature are an integral part of the child development process, the reality is that men are significantly underrepresented in virtually every area of the child development field, and in many ways equally undervalued.

Most families simply try to make the best of a challenging situation. Despite the heroic efforts of many single mothers, a number still feel ill-equipped and financially insecure to handle the emotional and financial needs of raising children alone. Although local government agencies have tried to meet the growing needs of today's single parents, there are still too few programs to fill the gaps. State governments have stepped in by toughening child support enforcement laws and imposing harsher punishments for fathers who fail to make child support payments, including jail time. These punitive efforts may be effective in raising



Christophe Beard has been working in the field of parental involvement and responsible fatherhood for over 15 years. He is a recognized parent educator who has trained thousands of parents and professionals on why parental involvement, both mom and dad, is vitally important to the healthy development of children of all ages. As a former Program Manager and Director with the Urban League and National Fatherhood Initiative, Chris

oversaw various state and federal projects designed to help organizations improve their parental involvement and promote family-friendly policies. He has traveled to over 35 states to work directly with local nonprofits and state agencies to help improve each organization's capacity to promote effective parental involvement. A seasoned technical writer, Chris also co-authored NFI's successful fatherhood reentry curriculum called "Inside Out Dad," which is currently being used in over 300 juvenile and adult correctional facilities across the country in all 50 states.

much needed funds from 'deadbeat dads,' but they do little to dispel the notion that fathers are more than just a paycheck.

The growing tide of social science research over the past 25 years has confirmed what many already knew: prolonged father absence can have negative effects on the development of children. Now, not every child growing up without their biological father is negatively affected, but most are at an increased risk of some of our worst social problems. Children in father-absent homes are:

- Five times more likely to live in poverty.
- Three times more likely to fail in school.
- Two times more likely to develop emotional or behavioral problems.
- Two times more likely to abuse drugs.
- Two times more likely to be abused and neglected.
- Two times more likely to become involved in crime.
- Three times more likely to commit suicide. (Horn & Sylvester, 2005)

Children and their single mothers aren't the only victims of father absence. Especially during these difficult economic times, meeting the needs of a growing family has become more than some parents can bear. Consequently, grandparents are increasingly being identified as the primary caregiver when both biological parents are incapable of raising their children. In 2006, it was estimated that 2.4 million co-resident grandparents were playing the role of primary caregiver for their grandchildren, with grandmothers making up the largest percentage of caregivers at 65% (Whitley & Kelley, 2006). Of course, this puts a tremendous burden on grandparents, many of whom are already living on the fringes of financial security. Some have come to call this burden the 'collateral damage' of absentee fathers.

So, where are the fathers?

Fathers weren't always this difficult to find. In the 1950s, federal statistics reported that 77% of African American homes were headed by a mother and a father. In White

households that number was a whopping 85%. Today, census figures show that nearly 70% of all African American children are being born to single mothers, more than twice the national average and almost triple the rate of Whites. Latinos, now considered to be the nation's largest minority group, fall on average in between Blacks and Whites in this statistic. However, recent statistics suggest that there is a surprising rise in father-absent families in the Latino community, a cause of great concern in this historically family-focused society.

Across ethnic and cultural boundaries, there are several barriers to explain why men are sometimes discouraged to take a more active role as a parent, but two barriers are probably the most common. First, for non-custodial fathers, the most often cited explanation is a negative relationship with the child's mother. A poor relationship with the child's mother makes it difficult for some fathers to maintain a close relationship with their children. Although frequency of contact with nonresidential children may decrease over time, the majority of low-income, nonresidential fathers maintain some contact. Second is the lack of financial security. Men often wrap their self-worth in their ability to provide for themselves and their families. For many fathers — particularly young fathers with few skills and few years of schooling — the lack of a stable job and income can cause these men either to evade the responsibility of supporting their children or turn to the underground economy to provide income. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy, shame, or guilt, causing many fathers to withdraw from their children, both emotionally and physically (Sylvester & Reich, 2002). For some men, however, becoming a father can be a powerful motivating factor to find and keep a job (Kotloff, 2005).

Custodial fathers can also face barriers of a different sort at home. Sometimes, fathers are seen by mothers and other family members as 'second class parents.' Historically, the traditional caregivers for children in the family

have been women. Some cultures emphasize this attitude more than others and assume that dads don't want to be involved. Unfortunately, this mindset can lead fathers to see themselves more as a 'part-time assistant' to mothers than as a full-time parent partner. This can contradict the fact that most fathers do care, even if that caring is not shown in conventional ways. A father's love and support may assume different forms — from emotional commitment to children's development to hands-on support in the home and responsibility for child care (Sylvester & Reich, 2002).

In today's difficult economic times, even families with two solid incomes feel challenged to pay their bills on time and provide for their children. This is especially true for low-income families. However, when some fathers struggle to meet their financial responsibilities, expanding the definition of what it means to be a responsible father must move beyond being the chief breadwinner and financial provider.

Time, research, and empirical data from grassroots programs have brought clarity to the debate about the importance of fathers in the lives of children. The consensus is that when fathers are positively involved with their children and attentive to their physical and emotional needs, children's well being increases. Studies now show that children with involved fathers display: better cognitive outcomes, even as infants; higher self-esteem and less

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC BERNARD



depression as teenagers; higher grades, test scores, and overall academic achievement; lower levels of drug and alcohol use, and higher levels of empathy and other pro-social behavior (Horn & Sylvester, 2005).

It has been a long hard battle to get to this point. Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, significant changes took place in American society that would change the country's cultural and political landscape forever. These changes had a tremendous effect on America's families. The role of fathers began to evolve beyond the role of just a financial provider. The most traditional view of fatherhood held by previous generations of men was best summed up by the old maxim that "if a child has a roof over his head and food on the table, a father's job is done." Today, whenever the discussion turns toward what roles fathers should play within the family unit, the conversation still focuses heavily on his financial responsibilities.

Historically, the importance of a father's emotional connection to his children has largely been minimized by our popular and political culture. Public policy discussions have especially been one-sided, choosing to focus attention on codifying paternity and child support issues in state and federal law, largely ignoring the benefits of promoting fathers as caregivers. Consequently, the challenge for those interested in increasing fathers' involvement in the lives of children is to shift the focus of the conversation, not away from the mother's equally important parenting role, or even away from the father's financial responsibility to his children, but more toward how shared, involved, committed, and responsible parenting by the father can increase the happiness and wellbeing of the child. The promotion of increased fatherhood involvement should emphasize the interdependence of all family members for the benefit of all.

Nationwide, more organizations are taking steps to reach out to fathers to get them involved in their programs with their children. Despite the difficulty inherent in these efforts, some of the most successful fatherhood programs have earned praise and recognition for increasing father involvement, especially when fathers weren't very inclined to get involved. It's wise to note that there are many

The consensus is that when fathers are positively involved with their children and attentive to their physical and emotional needs, children's well being increases.

family situations where the dad is simply not in the picture. Either by choice or by circumstance, some men are unable to fulfill their role as father. When this happens (the biological father is not present), positive male role models are vital. However, programs must resist the urge to promote male involvement activities alone without calling for

fathers to get more involved. This, of course, must be done with the greatest amount of sensitivity and care. There are a variety of ways to encourage fathers to get more involved, but every effort must consider each individual family's unique situation.

There is a growing body of knowledge about what it would take to increase positive fatherhood involvement with their children. Some of what we know is working, but there still is a lot of room for improvement. Nevertheless, when fathers are proactively engaged and empowered to become nurturing, caring parents, they do rise to the occasion and become more involved. Unfortunately, all of this comes at a time when more and more children are growing up without a committed father in their lives. The challenge moving forward is to continue to support the strengthening of America's families and build the capacity of those organizations committed to empowering fathers to become full partners in their children's lives.

References

Horn, W., & Sylvester, T. (2005). *Father facts* (4th edition). Germantown, MD: National Fatherhood Initiative.

Kotloff, L. J. (2005). *Leaving the streets: Young fathers move from hustling to legitimate work*. Philadelphia, PA: Public/Public Ventures. Available at www.ppv.org/ppv/publications/assets/181_publication.pdf

Sylvester, K., & Reich, K. (2002). *Making fathers count: Assessing the progress of responsible fatherhood efforts*. Baltimore, MD: Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Whitley, D., & Kelley, S. (2007). *Grandparents raising grandchildren: A Call to action*. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.