

Fathers

Fathers Make a Difference

A father's influence is profound and lasting, but limiting cultural stereotypes, his absence from the home, and the lack of societal supports can undercut his efforts.

Each father's idea of the role he plays in the lives of his children is often influenced by cultural stereotypes, such as:

The Wallet: This father is preoccupied with providing financial support for his family. He may work long hours to bring home his paycheck and does not take an active part in caring for the children. Making money becomes a distraction from family involvement.

The Rock: This "tough" father is strict and in charge of the family. He may also believe that a good father remains emotionally distant from his children, so expressions of affection are taboo.

The Dagwood Bumstead: This father tries to be a "real pal" to his children, but his efforts are often clumsy or extreme. He doesn't understand his children and feels confused about what to do. He may also feel that he is not respected within the family.

For much of the 20th century, the father's most common role was that of *The Wallet*, seeing to the basic necessities of life, such as food, clothing and shelter. While the role of provider is still considered highly important, notions about fatherhood have expanded considerably in the past three decades.

Added to the traditional perceptions of fatherhood is a more contemporary view, that of:

The Caregiver: This father works to combine toughness with tenderness. He enjoys his children but is not afraid to set firm but fair limits. He and his wife may cooperate in child-rearing and homemaking. This view defines fatherhood as the act of *being* a father, as opposed to merely *fathering* a child. It implies a bonding between father and child; fathers today are usually perceived as fully co-equal with the mothers of their children, and are much more involved in *all* aspects of the children's lives.

Child development experts are discovering more about the important role that fathers play in the physical, emotional, mental, social, and spiritual well-being of their children. Research also shows numerous negative impacts in the lives of children who live apart from their fathers or who spend little time with their fathers.

When father is absent: staying connected

Currently, more than 27 million children live apart from their fathers. In a typical year, well over one-third of these children won't even see their dad. More than half of all European-American children and three-quarters of all African-American children born since 1975 will live part of their formative years with only one parent, and in the vast majority of these cases, it's the father who is absent. The costs of an absent father are high.

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- Children with little or no contact with their fathers are more likely to have academic problems or to drop out of school.
- They are more likely to have emotional disorders and be depressed.
- They are more likely to use drugs and abuse alcohol.
- Girls are more likely to become pregnant as teens.
- Boys are more likely to become involved in crime and violence.

While father-absence, whether through divorce, death, or abandonment, is not the only contributing factor to these kinds of social problems, neither can it be ignored.

An absent father can stay connected with his child by:

- Parenting in the same ways he did before the divorce.
- Providing child care while mom works.
- Transporting children to and from school or social and sporting events.
- Providing daily child care.
- Spending a week or weekend in the child's hometown rather than always having the child travel.
- Using e-mail, the phone, videos, and photographs to stay in touch. Web-cams allow on-line conversations with live video.

Fathers play a key role in the successful socialization of children. Regardless of the marital status of the parents, the father needs to be actively engaged in his child's life, especially during the child's early years. Physical presence is not enough; he must be emotionally involved. Often, men don't know how to involve themselves effectively in the lives of their children, but they can learn.

The positive impact of a father

Consistent, positive interaction between fathers and children lowers the risk for many of the negative social and emotional impacts previously mentioned. Numerous studies have shown that fathers' availability and involvement reduce aggressive behavior in boys and enhance academic performance in both sons and daughters. Fathers' expressiveness and intimacy with their children appear to have the greatest long-term implications for children's development.

The effective father encourages independence, standing up for oneself, and acceptance of one's mind, body, and personality. Fathers play a large role in nurturing their children and can foster creativity, a positive body image, moral stan-

dards, and social competence. While each father is a unique person with his own parenting style, all effective fathers share the following characteristics:

- *Involvement*—Effective fathers are involved in the lives of their children. They attend their children's school events, games, and activities. They become acquainted with their children's friends, teachers, coaches, and child care providers. They also involve the children in their lives and the adult world by taking them to see the workplace, taking them along when the car needs to be repaired, etc.
- *Support*—Effective fathers expect a great deal from children, but they also accept and support the unique individuals their children are becoming. They acknowledge each child and are never ashamed of who the child is. They help their children learn to deal with failure.
- *Discipline*—Effective fathers set limits and are firm. They let their children know their beliefs and expectations and rely on explanations and reasoning rather than force.
- *Time*—Effective fathers spend time with their children. They realize that time with a child is really an investment in that child. Fathers who are "too busy" might consider asking, "How much time will it take?" rather than saying "I don't have the time." Time spent with the child when the child needs it is much more important than time spent with the child when it is convenient for the father. And it's important for fathers to keep their promises regarding time with their children; constantly postponing or cancelling planned events is discouraging and builds distrust.

Beyond that, key features of good parenting, regardless of gender, include:

- Unwavering love.
- Sensitivity to the child's needs and feelings.
- Clear and consistent limits geared to the child's stage of development.
- Firm but not harsh discipline.
- Encouragement of the child's emerging independence.
- Involvement in the child's education.
- Being a living example of respect for self and others.

Although many fine single parents embody these qualities and do an outstanding job raising their children to healthy adulthood, blessed is the child who has two parents working together to provide all of these things.

What are the barriers to father involvement?

Given the importance of fathers, why are so many men still absent, physically or emotionally? What internal and external barriers make it so hard for fathers and children to be together?

- *Economic barriers* are significant, especially in a society that often defines a man's value by how well he provides for his family.
- *Divorce* is a huge barrier.
- *Men often say they weren't socialized to parent.*
- *Professionals often act as if "parent" is synonymous with mother.*
- *Women may be a barrier to father involvement, treating the father as an intruder in their territory.*

Ways to strengthen fathers' connections with children *

For fathers to meet their full responsibility to their children, certain public perceptions about fatherhood must change, and practical strategies must be put into place to encourage involvement. Some key ways that fathers' connections with their children can be strengthened include:

- *At home.* Fathers must share responsibilities for caring for children. Setting up regular dates with dad gives kids time to connect without interference and mom time to do something for herself.
- *At work.* Assume that men have family responsibilities. Schedule meetings at times that are respectful of family obligations, and show respect, not condescension, for men who put their families first.
- *At school.* Invite fathers to be room coordinators, book readers, and active participants in academic progress conferences (whether or not they live with their child).

- *At the doctor's office.* Dad's opinion counts, too. Health care professionals need to recognize that dads today play an active role in the physical care of their children.
- *At school programs.* Whenever possible, a father who does not live with his children should be invited to school events. Faces shine twice as brightly when they see both parents in the audience.
- *In legal situations.* Dads' rights to see their children should be honored. Keeping a parent and child apart is painful to both of them. Only cases of mental, physical, or sexual abuse warrant separating a child from his or her parent.
- *In divorce.* Feuding partners must be ever mindful of resolving conflicts without putting children in the middle. This requires being objective about your children's needs (and not confusing them with your own), and compromising when the situation warrants.
- *In parent education classes.* Educators should plan courses with more than mom in mind. Researchers have found that men need more guidance about connecting with their children and, in some cases, assistance with anger management.
- *In fatherhood program.* It's fun to have activities where dads can do things with their children and other men. It's also healthy for men to have a separate forum where they can talk with other fathers about parenting issues. Providing child care can help dads get together.
- *In marriage or family partnerships.* Dad's ability to contribute to his children's upbringing needs support and respect from mom. He may not do everything to mom's specifications, but he deserves encouragement for trying to be involved in his children's lives. Encouraging rather than chastising helps fathers "get it right."

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Summary

Increasing amounts of research are being conducted on the father's role in today's families. These studies show the importance of the father's role, the profound influence of fathers in children's growth and development, and the characteristics that effective fathers have in common.

Children most likely to succeed on all fronts have parents who are married and living together in relative harmony. In cases of divorce, children do best when parents set aside the conflicts that eroded the marriage and agree to work together as co-parents.

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