



When Fathers Don't Father

Children suffer unless absent fathers become active parents

Nearly 17 million American children go to bed every night in fatherless homes.¹ These children – nearly 24 percent of all U.S. children – are at higher risk of growing up poor or becoming unwed parents, gang members, school drop-outs or victims of suicide just because their fathers are not in their lives.

The problem has not gone unnoticed. Getting tough on “dead-beat dads” has been a popular topic among lawmakers across the nation and has gotten wide news media coverage.

But the problem of fatherless homes goes well beyond delinquent child support payments. Solutions require considering the complex questions of why some fathers don't father and what can be done to motivate more of them to become part of their children's lives.

Children Suffer

Fathers play many important roles within families. They can be a nurturer, moral teacher, gender role model. They are also looked upon as a means of financial support for the family.

When fathers are absent, children are more vulnerable to a range of hardships. Children, for example, are much more likely to grow up poor when a father is missing from the home. In Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, the median family income of single parent families with children is less than \$12,000 a year – if the parent is employed. When the single parent is unemployed, family income falls below \$5,000 a year.

The relationship between a father

and his children – or the lack of one – is extremely important to children's psychological, emotional, developmental, and behavioral growth.

The absence of one parent from the lives of children raises the risk of children being injured either physically or emotionally. For example, children in single parent families face:

- an 77% greater risk of being physically abused.
- 87% greater risk of being harmed by physical neglect.
- 74% greater risk of suffering from emotional neglect.
- 80% greater risk of serious physical injury as the result of abuse.

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Fatherless Homes, Darker Prospects

The outcomes of children who grow up in fatherless homes are grim. These children, for example, account for nearly:

- 63% of youth suicides.
- 90% of all homeless and runaway children.
- 85% of children who exhibit behavioral disorders.
- 71% of all high school drop-outs.
- 75% of adolescent patients in chemical abuse centers.
- 70% of juveniles in state sponsored institutions.
- 85% of all youths in prison.

(statistics drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau, Centers for Disease Control, and the U.S. Department of Justice).

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Why Some Don't Father

While it can be argued that fathers have a moral, social, and legal obligation to contribute to their child's development, many fathers do not do so. Those who work with non-custodial fathers give several reasons for this.

Some fathers simply do not see a need for them to be involved in their children's lives.

But many are not financially able to support children. And because they cannot contribute financially – a role many men see as the most critical in fatherhood – they do not feel they have anything to contribute to their children. Many of these men can't find livable wage work because they lack the education or skills to hold down those jobs. And for some, a criminal record makes finding work more difficult.

Still others have drug and alcohol problems that render them unable or unwilling to be an active parent.

In some families, fatherlessness is a multigenerational problem. Men raised in these families grow up in single-mother homes and, in some cases, do not know what roles fathers play or even that their presence matters.

Many absent fathers live in social environments that offer them little emotional and peer support. For these men, not being involved in one's family is the norm rather than the exception.

These fundamental issues, experts say, need to be addressed before absent fathers are ready and able to help raise their children.

Bringing Fathers Back

Most of the political debate around absent fathers has centered on finding ways to force them to pay delinquent child support obligations.

The issue, although important, tends to simplify a complicated problem and distract policymakers from finding ways to get fathers involved with their children and families for the long term.

Several programs across the country help fathers become more involved in the lives of their children. In Pennsylvania, the Department of Public Welfare recently funded four community-based initiatives that are building a network of services and programs to help reunite fathers with their families.

Successful fatherhood programs share certain characteristics and philosophies.

Nearly all are tailored to the needs of the fathers they set out to help. The idea is to first eliminate obstacles to effective parenting. If substance abuse is a problem, for example, the focus would be on getting the father treatment.

Many absentee fathers are financially strapped. Nearly 38 percent

of non-custodial fathers cite the inability to pay as the chief reason they fail to make child support payments.² Programs that target unemployed fathers tend to focus on helping them land jobs that pay family-sustaining wages, often by providing basic job-hunting skills, general education, help finding job training, and programs that attempt to kindle motivation.

Many effective fatherhood programs also offer instruction on topics such as raising children, relationships, managing stress and anger, and child development.

"Society can either build jails or support fathers in self-development," said Jay Darr, Executive Director of the Healthy Start Male Initiative Program in Pittsburgh. "Many fathers who do not pay support feel inadequate and unable to provide, so they leave the child and the mother. While the law forces men to pay, society is not fostering change. The problem needs to be changed at the root."

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references

This report was based on, *Fatherhood Programs: The Challenges and Characteristics of Successful Programs to Reunite Fathers and Children*, a paper written by Shannah Tharp Taylor, is a Frank and Theresa Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education Fellow at the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development.

¹ Horn, W.F. (1998). *Fatherhood facts*, The National Fatherhood Initiative, Gaithersburg, Maryland.

² Horn, op. cit.

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