

Encyclopedia of Human Development

Fathers

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Significant societal shifts in the definitions and role expectations of fathers have occurred within the past 50 years. In the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, fathers' role as the “breadwinners and disciplinarians” was the typical expectation; whereas in the decade of the 1970s, there were expectations that fathers would increase participation in the household responsibilities. In the 1980s, the idea of the nurturing and emotional father was emphasized, whereas the 1990s and the current decade have attended to finding the balance among the many different roles, including stay-at-home fathers and life as a single parent.

Many of these varied roles occurred largely in response to political and economic changes. Beginning in the 1960s and continuing into the 1990s, significant societal changes occurred that have affected the demographics of fatherhood, as divorce and out-of-wedlock births tripled the number of children growing up in homes without a father present. In 1994, 24 million American children were living without their biological [p. 506 ↓] fathers, and in 2002, 40% did not have contact with their nonresidential fathers. Over several decades of research, the diverse effects of father absence on children's development have become clearer, and this research has led to an increased recognition of the unique contribution of a father's role in a child's life. The research has occurred in many disciplines and fields and has illustrated the importance of father roles in the child's development.

Some important differences now being emphasized about the father's unique role include the finding that fathers engage in more physically stimulating play with their children that involves orientation toward specific goals, with less time spent by the father on the caretaking activities. This physical play benefits children in many areas, including providing them with an understanding of their own behavior, helping them learn to regulate their own emotions, and helping them learn empathy skills by recognizing the emotional cues of others. These are all benchmarks of appropriate socialization of children and demonstrate how important a father is to healthy development. During infancy, this paternal style of interaction is shown in the infant being provided with higher amounts of stimulation while the father holds the infant, which may account for the finding that infants sometimes prefer to be held by their fathers. Additionally, children tend to prefer their fathers to act as their “playmates” because of this

quality. Research with infants and fathers has also led to the discovery that infants who have involved fathers tend to display less stranger anxiety than those with noninvolved fathers. Furthermore, babies of involved fathers are more responsive socially, demonstrate more resiliency during stressful situations, and perform better on developmental tests. Very young children have also been shown to be able to differentiate between the mother's and father's roles in their lives.

Research has demonstrated that fathers who choose to be present at their children's birth can more accurately describe their baby's moods and temperament and can provide an increased understanding of a child's personality at 3 and 6 months of age. Furthermore, these fathers feel much more drawn to their child (i.e., spending large amounts of time looking or touching their newborn child). When mother-child bonding is emphasized at the cost of the early father-child relationship, there is evidence that some fathers experience their own version of the "baby blues" and that contact with the infant alleviates this. During the past few decades, there have been differing opinions as to whether there was a biological or cultural rationale for the differences between maternal and paternal interaction styles. The debate is not settled at this time, but the evidence is supportive of both.

Research has also demonstrated that there are many similarities in paternal and maternal interaction styles. As children get older and the opportunities for play activities decrease, fathers tend to engage in more nurturant caretaking, so that this appears to be a shared component between mothers and fathers during middle childhood. Similarly, fathers also are involved with school and extracurricular activities on an equal basis with mothers. Interestingly, the quality of the spousal relationship is predictive of the amount and quality of interaction between fathers and their children, with better quality predictive of more and better father-child interaction.

In addition to the immediate consequences to the child, a father's presence has an impact on the child's life that extends into long-term outcomes. Children who are not raised with fathers present have a significantly higher risk for living in poverty than children with a father and mother, and they are more likely to engage in drug, alcohol, and tobacco use. These children are more likely to fail school, have more emotional and behavioral problems that require psychiatric treatment, and are at greater risk for committing suicide. Male fatherless children are also more likely to become juvenile

offenders, whereas females without fathers are more likely to be sexually active than their peers with fathers. Additionally, if fathers actively participate in their children's lives, their sons tend to be less aggressive and more expressive emotionally.

As the research began to demonstrate the negative effects of the father's absence in a child's life, a social movement emerged that involved governmental agencies, researchers, advocates, and policy makers. This social movement has led to the generation of major data collections about the father's role and the establishment of an influx of father-focused organizations.

This increasing support for additional understanding and research into the father's role was demonstrated in June 2002 when Child Trend released a report that included information on parenting practices of fathers, which was a first-of-its-kind report. This significant report provided data about the male role in the areas of fertility, parenting, and family formation. When this was released in 2002, it was the first time statistics were specifically examined regarding provision of parenting by fathers. This research led to some clarification of gender stereotypes. For example, contrary to the belief that fathers are disengaged from their children, the findings indicated that **[p. 507 ↓]** fathers who reside with their children are quite involved, with close to 68% engaging in an outdoor activity at least once a week.

In addition to increases in data gathering, fatherfocused organizations have had a significant impact. Several of the organizations have focused on decreasing absenteeism of fathers and promoting the idea of the responsible father. Examples of these include the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) and the Fatherhood Project. The NFI has as its mission the goal of improvement in children's well-being by increasing the amount of children growing up with fathers who are involved, committed, and responsible to them. The latter initiative is involved in research and education and has as its aim to support male involvement in child rearing. It is significant in that it began in 1981 and is the longest-running national initiative on fatherhood.

As this social movement has become energized, there have been other significant changes within the past decade, one of which is that the number of fathers being defined as primary caregivers has risen. The 1993 U.S. Census reported that 1.9 million

fathers were the primary caregivers to their children. This number is further supported by increasing numbers of conferences for stay-at-home fathers.

Another interesting aspect of the father's role is in the area of male teenage parenting, which has its own set of difficulties. Research has found that although adolescent fathers and their peers who do not have children have similar attitudes, sexual knowledge, and behavior generally, adolescent fathers are quite likely not to live with the mother of the child and consequently feel alienated from the child during pregnancy and especially in the child's younger years. However, if an adolescent father is active in early decision making about the child, he is more likely to be involved both during pregnancy and beyond. Most adolescent males, who had some level of commitment to the mother before the pregnancy, want to be involved in the child rearing, whereas those without a commitment have a lack of interest in establishing a relationship with the child and are usually not involved in raising the child.

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