

# DO FATHERS MATTER?

## Father's Influence on Children's Development



■ Most parenthood research has focused on the mother and her role and impact on the child. However, in the last few decades a body of literature has emerged looking at the father's role in a child's life and the adverse effects of absent fathers. In general, the research suggests that fathers play an integral role in their child's life and affect child outcomes. A father's role and impact are influenced by various biological, social, and environmental factors. Furthermore, a child who grows up without a father is more likely have more negative outcomes than a child who has an involved father.

A main aspect of fatherhood research looks at what is included in the role of a father. There are two main views of what a father's role should look like. The traditional perspective, endorsed by Cleaver, suggests that a father's roles include: provider, protector, role model, disciplinarian, entertainer, and teacher. Contrarily, the contemporary viewpoint, backed by Cosby, sees

a father's roles consisting of: caregiver, partner with the child's mother, and a source of affection and emotional support.

Another aspect of fatherhood research deals with the differences between the roles of mothers and fathers. The media perpetuates



the idea that fathers are incapable of taking a caretaker role with their child, especially with young children. However, research informs us that fathers, too, respond sensitively and attentively during interactions with their children. In the growing body of fatherhood literature, a significant portion has been dedicated to the father-infant relationship. Bader (1995) found that fathers are emotionally connected to their infants. Rodholm & Larson's (1982) study examined fathers' behaviors when being introduced to their newborn and found

that

fathers behave appropriately at the first meeting. Furthermore, although the changes may differ, both fathers and mothers have hormonal changes around the birth (Rodholm & Larson, 1982). Also, fathers, just as mothers, are attentive, sensitive, and skillful in their interactions with infants. For example, fathers alter speech patterns and were equally as responsive to infant cues (Storey, Walsh, Quinton, & Wynne-Lamb, 1997).

Although fathers do show some similarities to mothers, there are some major differences. Research on these differences usually focuses on the variation in the types of activities of parents (Edwards, 2000). For example, fathers are more likely than mothers to be involved in social activities, play, and physical interactions. Further, fathers average more playtime with children, are more playful and less restrictive, and praise infants more during physical play. Father's play is highly correlated with self-regulation. Father's play differs from mother's play in

THE NORTH CAROLINA AGRICULTURAL & TECHNICAL STATE UNIVERSITY



THE JOINT  
MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK  
PROGRAM



THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

that it is more unusual, unpredictable, and physically stimulating. A mother's play tends to include games of cognitive stimulation. These differences give reason to why a father's role is so unique.

Another major area of fatherhood research is fatherless homes and the effects that situation has on the children in



the home. Statistics concerning fatherless homes are staggering. Sixty-three percent of youth suicides are committed by children from fatherless homes. Young men who grow up without a father are twice as likely to go to jail as those who grew up in a traditional two-parent household. Similarly, seventy percent of juveniles come from fatherless homes. In addition, eighty-five percent of children with behavioral disorders do not have a father. Furthermore, academic and career achievement is negative-

ly correlated with father absence. When a father is absent, children tend to have lower IQ levels, are more likely to drop out of school, make lower wages as adults, and are more likely to establish single households. Contrarily, when a father is present children tend to score higher on achievement tests, gain higher levels of cognitive abilities, perform better in school, and have higher levels of social competence.

More specifically, father absence can affect girls and boys differently. Daughters,

raised without a father, are more likely to engage in sexual activity and get pregnant at an earlier age. Females who grow up in a fatherless home are more likely to divorce, remarry, and have children out of wed-lock. Father absence also increased the level of peer influence in females. When a male lacks a positive father-son relationship, it may

influence future aggressive behaviors, risky sexual attitudes, and poor school performance. In addition, father absence may negatively influence a male child's ability to communicate and develop/maintain relationships.

To help combat fatherlessness and promote responsible fathering, several steps should be taken. Fathers must continue to be supported and have their role promoted. Also, intergenerational fathering should be looked into and utilized. Next, dads must be allowed to be dads by being helped to fulfill their roles, which many times differ from a mother's roles. Fathers should also be encouraged to model both physical and cognitive play. Research continually proves that father absence has serious aversive effects on the children involved. Positive father-child relationships are a key component to combating serious issues across all age ranges.

■ ■ *Jeffrey Shears, PhD*

*Lauren Carter, MSW Student*



THE NORTH CAROLINA AGRICULTURAL & TECHNICAL STATE UNIVERSITY



THE JOINT  
MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK  
PROGRAM



THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO