

Fathers: In or Out?

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Occasionally, there is a flurry of media attention to the issue of “responsible fatherhood.” Promise Keepers will gather thousands of men at a rally or Bill Cosby will call on Black men to get more involved. But there’s much more to the modern “fatherhood” issue than these discrete news items. The federal government has its own fatherhood initiative, which sponsors studies and projects intended to encourage men to be stable, involved fathers. States, cities, and churches too, are participating in these efforts. Sociological and other scientific journals – including the journals *Fatherhood* and *Sex Roles* – are monthly publishing the results of empirical studies about the role of the father, or about the relationships between fathering and child outcomes. Chances are, too, that the sociology or psychology department at your local university is participating in one or more of these.

Why is fathering such a hot topic at the moment? It is largely because of the amount of lone-parenting being performed by women today. Figures from the 2007 Census update show that approximately 25.8% of 74 million U.S. children under 18 (about 19 million), live in lone-parent households. Of these, approximately 16.65 million live with their mothers alone. While some non-residential fathers remain involved with their children, many do not: a 2007 study reported that less than 30% of non-resident, divorced fathers generally have weekly contact with their children. Never-married, non-residential fathers see their children even less often. Furthermore, father-absence is even more prevalent in poor and minority communities. Again, based upon 2007 figures, approximately 40% of children in households earning less than \$50,000 annually, live with their mother alone. This is true of only 7% of children in households earning more than \$50,000. Approximately 50% of Black children live in mother-only households, versus 17% of White children.

Divorce accounts for a good deal of female lone-parenting, with approximately one million children each year experiencing their parents’ divorce. Women retain custody in a large majority of cases. Furthermore, about 38% of all children are born outside of marriage annually in the United States. Use of the new reproductive technologies also accounts for some lone-parenting as well, given that there are no laws in any U.S. jurisdiction restricting the use of such technologies to married couples. Last, but not least, same-sex partner households also account for one-sexed parenting, either by males or females. They pose some different questions, however, than the typical lone-parent household, given that two adults are present, and that their sexual orientation may have its own effects upon the children of the household.

You might have noticed at this point, that the question of the “necessity of



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fathering” has *not* arisen at this time due to data suggesting that children’s best interests are *compromised* when fathers are present. Rather, proposals to legitimize father-absence have arisen because adults are making choices about intimate relationships which happen to result in father-absence. When proposals about parenting arise out of a desire to justify adults’ choices — versus any desire to promote children’s welfare -- we should react with suspicion at the very least.

The “argument against the necessity of fathers” can take different forms. Some suggest that the issue does not deserve sustained attention for the reason suggested immediately above: conceding the need for stable, active fathering would crimp adults’ freedom of choice regarding intimate sexual activities. Others suggest that all discussions about the good of fathering lead inevitably to stigmatizing children reared without fathers. Some claim that there simply isn’t sufficient empirical evidence that fathering is linked with child welfare. Others hold that while there might be empirical evidence indicating children’s need for fathers, neither law nor culture should play a role in boosting involved-fathering, because there’s nothing either can do. Society should rather throw up its collective hands and ask the government to step in with generous payments for lone-mother-households to compensate for the economic losses associated with father-absence.

There are serious flaws in these lines of argument. First, while the sociology of fatherhood is relatively new (and far less developed than the sociology of motherhood) , there are many studies available. They tend to show that fathers’ contributions to children’s welfare are not merely attributable to the money they contribute, or to the usefulness of having a “second adult” help out. (*See e.g.* William Marsiglio, Paul-Amato, Randal D. Day & Michael E. Lamb, *Scholarship on Fatherhood in the 1990s and Beyond* 62 *J. of Marriage & Family* 1173, 1184 (2000); David Eggebeen, *Do Fathers Matter Uniquely for Adolescent Well-Being?* Institute for American Values Center for Marriage and Families, Res. Brief 14 (Oct. 2008)). They also show that fathers’ contributions are not just duplicative of the mothers, though some of their contributions are. Rather, it appears that fathers also contribute “uniquely” to child well-being, directly and via their interactions with the mother, including fathers’ support for mothers’ parenting and other aspirations.

Second, the movement to declare two-sexed-parenting superfluous is somewhat suspicious. Many of its prominent voices are parties with vested interests in the outcome, in particular homosexual activists, and activists for a notion of sexual freedom which insists that absolutely everything related to sex and childbearing is a private matter for personal choice. We’ve seen this movie before... It was self-interested parties who drove harmful changes in the laws affecting divorce, abortion, and assisted reproductive technologies. Such groups ordinarily give no deference to millennia of human experience, nor to “clues” offered us by the human body.

But even if they refuse to credit studies tending to show children’s need for fathers, there are other types of scientific studies that, de facto, point to the wisdom of working to secure greater father- involvement. These include studies indicating that it is easier and better for children to have two adult caretakers than one. Children do



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not mature for a long time. Human brains are relatively large as compared with other mammals, and require years of intense interaction and education in order to develop properly. Modern parenting is very time-intensive given the stepped up demands of education and the number of activities in which children are regularly engaged. Given all of this, and given the fact that almost no one is as interested in a child as his or her natural parents, how can we escape the conclusion that we need to secure the father's involvement? The father is the only adult other than the mother who will have a strong, natural inclination to give a child what is needed. To put it differently: does anybody really believe that strangers, or even extended family members, or friends, or government employees, will really invest in a child in the way a parent will? Articles claim that there exist "networks" of parent-like figures for children – including day care providers, extended family, or male or female role models brought into one-sexed parenting households. (*See, e.g. Melissa Murray, The Networked Family: Reframing the Legal Understanding of Caregiving and Caregivers, 98 Va. L. Rev. 385 (2008)*). But such pieces give no "data" regarding how often this happens, nor about the depth of "parent-like" attachment expressed by any of these individuals (although there are some studies indicating frequent extended -family involvement in various minority communities.) Again, given what children need, and given men's more likely psychological, emotional and even evolutionary-biological attachment to their offspring – isn't it the case that if we're encouraging second-adult involvement with a child, we're talking "father"?

Two final points: first, what about what men need? Lest they fail in what Erik Erikson called the crucial seventh stage of development -- generativity versus stagnation – men have a need too, to care for the well-being of the next generation. Practically speaking, this means children. Neurobiological evidence seems to confirm this. Animal studies indicate that mammals who parent alter their brain development for the better (better memory, possibly less rapid age-related decline, etc.)

Second, what about what society needs in the way of "father conscious" men? By this I mean that if men do not get involved with their children, and if (as it turns out) their children too are more likely to become uninvolved fathers, then more and more social institutions will be populated or even led by men with no father-consciousness. Women will be left more often to "do it all" at both home and work. Governments, workplaces, schools, and other institutions will be less and less inclined to adopt policies which allow families to put their children first. How could this possibly please the (largely female) group of family law scholars who have given up on men? What are the chances that institutions populated by such men will give women and children the generous policies or benefits that lone-mothers would then desperately need in order to compensate for father-absence? In short, those who called men superfluous today may wish they hadn't tomorrow.

A final thought. In his *Theology of the Body*, John Paul II claimed that learning to care permanently for another in a body-soul union characterized by mutual service, would be the path to love, and thus to Christ, for the vast majority of human beings.



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Briefs

Fathers today are more inclined to drift away from their families; they have the “blessing” of a body of scholars who have concluded that men are substitutable, unnecessary or irredeemable. This does not at all square with the vision of the human person – male or female -- proposed by Christian anthropology. We cannot abandon efforts to call men back to their role as fathers.

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