

Fathers and Families

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By Ronald J. Rychlak

With Father's day just around the corner, it's a good time to take a look at the importance of fathers in our society. In 1950, 6 percent of America's children lived in a home without a father. Today, almost one out of every four children does not have a "Dad" at home, and about 40 percent do not have their biological father at home. In fact, the United States is the world's leader in fatherless families.

According to David Blackenhorn, author of *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*, being a father is "society's most important role for men." A good father "puts his family first. He is responsible for them. He sacrifices for them." He may pitch in with household duties, but that is not his most important contribution to the family.

Fathers help their children grow by encouraging them to explore their limits. Blackenhorn explains: "Fathers are likely to devote special attention to character traits necessary for the future, especially qualities such as independence, self-reliance, and the willingness to test limits and take risks." Fathers also provide economic security: Children living in single-parent homes are far more likely to experience poverty in their youth than are children in two-parent families.

Watching a father leave is particularly devastating to children. We have always known that divorce can have a significant psychological impact on a child, but there was always the argument that perhaps children would be better off living with one parent (almost always the mother) than with two parents who were unhappy together. The evidence is now in, and the hypothesis has failed.

In *The Abolition of Marriage*, author Maggie Gallagher summarizes the massive evidence showing that "short of pathological brutality, divorce is never good for children." Moreover, remarriage after divorce typically does not solve the children's problems and often makes them worse. (Interestingly, children of widows usually do not suffer as badly as do children of divorced or never-married mothers.) Unfortunately, today we have a whole industry built around divorce, and that industry survives by encouraging people -- including parents -- to take the step that is so damaging to children.

There is much debate over the precise impact of fatherlessness, and we all know single mothers who have done a great job rearing their children. Nevertheless, fatherlessness has been linked to a significant increase in criminal activity, suicide, behavioral problems, chemical substance abuse, dropping out of high school, and being a victim of abuse (especially when

the child lives with a mother who has a new man in the house). Well over half of all adolescent murderers and long-term prison inmates grew up without fathers in their home.

In addition to being important to the children, fatherhood also changes the father. The vast majority of crime in America is committed by young men. If these men were leading families, as good fathers do -- rather than engaging in drug abuse, gang activity, and other destructive behaviors -- they would have to go to work, earn money, and help take care of their children. They would be better people. As the nonprofit National Fatherhood Initiative puts it: "What reduces crime, child poverty, teen pregnancy, and requires no new taxes? -- Good Fathers."

Social programs designed to benefit children and poor families often do not work. When the government steps in to fill the role of economic provider, it strips young men of their self-worth. Men used to talk about "having to get married" when a woman got pregnant. It may not have been the happiest of situations, but for the father it was a time of assessing his role. He had to settle down and earn a living; he had to protect his family. He had to grow up.

What faces a young man in a similar situation today? If the woman decides to keep the baby, she does not need him for economic support; the government will take care of that. So the young man feels no obligation to settle down. He can stay carefree and avoid responsibility. In that situation, fatherhood is unable to have its civilizing effect. Unfortunately, men who father illegitimate children disproportionately turn to crime, use drugs, and suffer premature death.

If America is going to solve its social problems, young men must have positions of responsibility, and children need to have their fathers. We don't need more federal programs to replace fathers or to create jobs for young men. We need to teach boys how to become men. We need them to become responsible fathers. Mothers alone cannot take their place. Governmental agencies can't even come close.

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