



National Center on Fathers and Families

BRIEF

*NCOFF Briefs provide summaries of literature reviews, research reports, and working papers published by NCOFF and of emerging practice- and policy-focused issues in the field. This brief, *Father Presence Matters*, is one of seven developed upon NCOFF's seven Core Learnings and a literature review written by Deborah Johnson of the University of Wisconsin - Madison. Designed to examine in-depth issues in the Core Learnings, the seven literature reviews were the centerpiece of discussion in the 1995-1997 Fathers and Families Roundtable Series, which brought together researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to examine issues in the Core Learnings and findings thought to be essential in working with fathers. Copies of literature reviews, Roundtable proceedings, and related reports are available from NCOFF in paper form, or via the internet (<http://www.ncoff.gse.upenn.edu>).*

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Father Presence Matters:

A Review of the Literature

Key Findings

- A far greater amount of research focuses on father absence than on father presence. The bulk of the research concludes that father absence has a negative impact on children's development. However, this work is not definitive.
- The existing literature reveals significant ethnic variation in fathers' residential status and contact with children. Two possible explanations for this finding are cultural values and methodological issues.
- Postdivorce decreases in children's well-being are frequently attributed to divorce but may be a result of long-term, predivorce marital conflict.
- The single-parent literature emphasizes the economic disadvantages faced by children who live apart from their fathers. This literature highlights the need for studies that separate the effects of living in poverty from the effects of living in a particular family structure and that distinguish between single parents living alone and those living with extended family members.
- Most studies have examined the impact of father absence on boys exclusively. Boys from families with nonresident fathers exhibit more aggressive behaviors but are more likely to express androgynous attitudes than their peers. Evidence does not support the traditional perception that these boys are more likely to be homosexual.
- It appears that father absence may have different effects on boys and girls. Boys tend to experience more academic and social disruption when fathers are not present in the household. Father absence challenges girls' emotional stability but does not seem to undermine their school performance.
- The reliance on small samples (until recently) and the frequent confounding of race and class are two examples of the methodological problems that plague father absence research.

Recommendations for Research

- New studies incorporating longitudinal, multimethod, and predictive designs are needed to illuminate the effects of father presence and absence over the course of children's lives.
- A greater balance should be struck in research on ethnic fathers. African American and Latino fathers are currently overrepresented in studies of father absence and underrepresented in studies of father presence and involvement. Further, there is a great need for focused research on American Indian and Asian American fathers.

Recommendations for Practice and Policy

- Policies and programs targeting families should concentrate more on the needs of the child and less on the structure of the household. The concept of the family should be expanded to include extended family relations and other significant adults in the child's life.
- Programs should seek to persuade fathers that their role as nurturer is as important to their children as their role as provider.

Father Presence Matters: A Review of the Literature

This review examines father presence by discussing research on father absence, single parenting, marital disruption, divorce, and fathers' caring. To limit the discussion to only those studies that directly address father absence risks omitting research that can contribute to current thinking on father presence. The review discusses the research addressing the impact of father presence on child development in the context of three paradigms: (1) the father absence paradigm; (2) the single, never-married parent paradigm, including divorce as a special case; and (3) the father presence paradigm.

The three paradigms examined here mirror the chronological progression of research emphasis on fathers' influence. The emergence and proliferation of father absence literature is linked to demographic changes in the United States, perhaps initiated during World War II, but more intensively felt and recognized in the last three decades.

Since the late 1980s, much of the interest in father absence has been replaced by a focus on father-specific parenting roles, relations, and involvement. A similar shift of focus took place in the burgeoning literature on single-mother households. Rather than continuing to ask why fathers leave or fail to maintain contact with their children, researchers have begun to examine the complex challenges of unmarried and divorced women rearing children.

References:

Bee, 1974; Belsky, 1984; Cherlin, 1981; McLanahan and Booth, 1989; Mott, 1994.

The Father Absence Paradigm

Three major emphases are identified in the literature on father absence: the impact of father absence on (1) intellectual or academic achievement, (2) gender-specific development, and (3) general behavioral adjustment and aggression in males.

Academic Performance, Cognitive Development, and Intellectual Functioning. A major focus of the research has been the effect of father absence on the intellectual and academic performance of children. A number of studies found that children in father-absent households had lower IQ, verbal, and performance scores than children in father-present households. Other research has suggested that race and class may have been confounded in this research. According to Mott (1994), academic performance is far less sensitive to fa-

ther presence for girls than for boys. Boys' academic performance is typically found to be impaired by father absence. Untested mediating variables, such as parental attitudes and childrearing strategies, may explain this variation.

Gender-Specific Psychological/Emotional Development and Well-Being. Studies on the psychological vulnerability of children from father-absent households suggest that these children are more likely to experience emotional disorders and depression than are children from father-present households. Males are disproportionately assessed in the context of father absence.

Lack of contact with fathers appears to have its most dramatic effects on boys. Most father absence research focuses on masculine identity development, school success, and social prowess because these characteristics are considered to be essential ingredients for successful integration into adult American life and for the fulfillment of the male provider role. In the 1960s and 1970s, researchers found father-absent boys to be less masculine, more effeminate, and more prone to homosexuality than boys from father-present homes. Subsequent research has found the evidence supporting these findings to be inconclusive.

Girls reared in single-mother homes tend to marry early and have children early; they also have an increased likelihood of divorce, remarriage, and out-of-wedlock child-bearing, according to McLanahan and Bumpass (1988). These effects are most pronounced for White girls. Hetherington (1972) found that family disruption prior to the child's fifth birthday resulted in more permissive attitudes and behaviors among both Black and White girls. However, in a study designed to test Hetherington's findings among Black and White college girls, no differences were found between girls with resident fathers and those with nonresident fathers in sex-role attitudes, romantic love, and relations with males. However, loss of the father before age five was associated with greater approval seeking.

Aggression. Biller (1974) argued that aggression in father-absent boys was due to the mother-headed family's inability to foster appropriate expression of masculinity. Broude (1990) countered that wider cultural imperatives may encourage aggression in boys. Father availability tends to have an attenuating effect on boys' aggressive tendencies, suggesting that aggression is the indirect effect of inconsistent contact with the father.

References:

Amato and Keith, 1991; Baydar, 1988; Bee, 1974; Biller, 1974; Broude, 1990; Cazenave, 1979; Eberhardt and Schill, 1984; Hainline and Feig, 1978; Herzog and Sudia, 1973; Hetherington, 1972; Hetherington, et al., 1983; Hunt and Hunt, 1977; Lessing, Zagorin, and Nelson, 1970; McLanahan and Bumpass, 1988; Mott, 1994.

The Single Parent Paradigm

Children living in mother-only families almost inevitably experience financial challenges as a result of father absence. Children of single mothers often experience sudden drops in their standard of living (particularly in the case of divorce) or become entrenched in disparate poverty (particularly children of color). Economic marginality creates numerous challenges for parenting. For the benefit of their children, many single mothers must struggle to maintain consistent child support and parenting relations with nonresident fathers. Empirically, the challenge for researchers is to distinguish the effects of poverty itself from the effects of living in a particular family structure.

Children from single-mother families often suffer from poor academic performance, lower educational attainment, and early pregnancy, typically due to the loss of income that accompanies the absence of the father from the household. McLoyd (1990) argues that single-mother families experience a decrease in their standard of living not only because of the loss of the father's income but also because the new primary wage-earner is more likely to face the gender and racial discrimination reflected in the underemployment and unemployment of women. Single mothers have the highest poverty rates of any group in the United, and African-American single mothers are more than twice as poor as White single mothers.

Although the relationship between divorced fathers and their children may be considered a special case of the single parent paradigm, it is critical to view divorce as a process rather than an isolated event in the life of the child. Predivorce conflict may predict child outcomes better than changes in paternal residence and contact.

Father-child relations change in the most significant ways during the decline of a marriage. According to Belsky et al. (1991), fathers are more intrusive and have more negative interactions with their children when they doubt their love for their wives and the durability of their marriage. It appears that a father's troubled relationship with his wife is accompanied by a parallel decrease in the quality of his relationship with his children. Children of divorce typically fare best if the divorce occurs when they are older and if remarriage does not follow immediately.

References:

Belsky et al., 1991; Dickerson, 1995; Hetherington et al., 1978; Jarrett, 1994; Lamb, 1987; McLanahan and Booth, 1989; McLoyd, 1990; Wallerstein, 1987.

The Father Presence Paradigm

The father absence paradigm is sorely limited by its emphasis on whether the biological father lives in the child's home and the number of visits paid by a nonresident father in a given window of time. Furthermore, the paradigm seems to be based on a somewhat outdated conception of masculinity that views paternal involvement as essentially dichotomous (present or absent). By contrast, the father presence paradigm extends the role of the father beyond physical and fiscal boundaries to include emotional and caregiving responsibilities. This paradigm is based on an ecological perspective that the boundaries of households and the roles of income providers are important but are too narrow to assess the critical and broad question of fathers' presence and their unique contribution to child development.

Fathers' participation in two-parent families ebbs and flows according to demands placed on fathers and their perception of the quality of care given by mothers. Numerous studies have emphasized that fathers' availability and involvement reduce aggressive behavior in boys. Meaningful paternal involvement also improves the well-being of younger children. Fathers' expressiveness and intimacy with their children appear to have the greatest long-term implications for children's development. A number of studies find that continued contact with nonresident fathers who are loving, supportive, and nurturant increases girls' emotional well-being.

Researchers have found differences in patterns of father involvement by race. For instance, Mott (1994) found that White youth are two to three times more likely to live in a two-parent family than are Black youth. However, nonresident Black fathers are nearly one-and-one-half times more likely to visit their children on a weekly basis than nonresident White fathers. After four years of separation, contact with children tapered off for all fathers. However, White fathers were more likely than Black fathers to become infrequent visitors to their children. It is important to note that these findings were based on research that often confounded race and class by comparing low-income, African American families to working-class or middle-class, White families.

The author of the review notes that the literature on fathers' caring, involvement, and interaction has several limitations for developing a framework for research on father presence. One limitation is that the focus of much of this research is limited to fathers of infants. Also, some studies merely extrapolate the effects of father-child relationships from findings on mother-infant relationships. Despite these shortcomings, however, the father presence paradigm extends the concept of fatherhood beyond economic contribution and mere physical presence to allow for a richer understanding of the role of fathers in their children's lives.

References:

Broude, 1990; Furstenberg, et al., 1987; Grossman, Pollack, and Golding, 1988; Mott, 1994.

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