

Position Paper – Father Absence

Mike Hoback

Southern Adventist University

## **Statement of the Problem**

### **Topic Importance**

The current direction of American family culture shows that dual parent homes, with both a father and mother present, are not nearly as common as they used to be. Increasing divorce rates (affecting 50% of marriages), higher rates of re-marriages and second divorces, and more children who are born out of wedlock are fairly accurate depictions of modern American families (Sieber, 2008; Sutton & Munson, 2008; Skevik, 2006).

### **Prevalence of the Problem**

Research by DeBall (2008) has shown that around one out of two children in America will spend part of their childhood years in a single parent family. About 90 percent of children, who live in one parent homes, live with their mother (Zastrow & Kirschen-Ashman, 2010, p. 521). The prevalence of absent fathers in American families is “arguably the most consequential trend of our time” according to Horn and Bush (2003). With the prevalence of broken or single-parent homes, questions remain as to how children are being affected. The term ‘absent father’ has become a concerning concept of today’s family and has put pressure on social services to educate parents on the importance of ensuring that fathers are involved in the lives of their children (Skevik, 2006).

### **Impact of the Problem**

Children without stable father figures in their lives display a variety of concerning differences from those that are raised in stable homes with both a mother and father. This impact will be displayed more in-depth in the following literature review.

### **Accomplishments of the Literature Review**

The following literature review will discuss a variety of apparent trends displayed in children that are raised in fatherless families. Let it be noted, that the purpose of this paper is not to discredit the hard work and devotion that is required of single mothers, but rather to emphasize the importance of allowing father figures to take part in the lives of their children. Also, in modern society, there are a variety of choices that women are making regarding how they decide to have children. To narrow the focus, this paper will not focus on women who have children on their own when no father is involved. This research is more focused on family situations where a separation between mother and father has occurred and children are involved.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Parental Roles**

Within the healthy family dynamic, both the mother and father contribute different parental gender roles. Traditional roles of mothers in the home hold more of the nurturing characteristics, which help to foster the interpersonal skills of children. Fathers are more likely to be operative disciplinarians and help to nurture children's cognitive skills (DeBall, 2008). Considering that each parent helps to benefit different aspects of a child's healthy development, the roles that a single-parent must fill have been considerably researched. Research conducted by McLanahan and Teitler (1999) indicates that, "on average, children who grow up with both biological parents do better in terms of human capital development and early family formation behavior than children who grow up with only one of their parents" (p. 99).

Researchers have emphasized the importance of the mother's role throughout the development of the child, particularly when it comes to emotional permanence. Mothers often take the position of primary caregiver in the lives of their children, and research on attachment

has often been done on the mother and child relationship (Perrin, Baker, Romelus, Jones, & Heesacker, 2009). While the mother's role is vital, it is necessary to also emphasize the importance of father figures in the lives of children.

### **Father Presence**

When researching the role of fathers, a distinction must be made regarding the different forms of support that a father can offer. Whether it is emotional, physical, or psychological it is evident that fathers do have a clear importance in their children's' lives.

There are a number of margins that must be set when defining a 'present father' and an 'absent father'. Difficulty in this difference occurs because sometimes fathers who are in the home are not truly involved with the family/children. When referring to a present father, it is important to note that this refers to a father who is engaged in the family dynamic and is supportive of his children in a variety of ways. Invested fathers are concerned with the tasks that are required to maintain the survival of their children. Involvement, on the other hand, requires engagement, face-time, and caring interaction. Not only is the father interested in the survival of his child, but he is also genuinely engaged in his or her life (Combs-Orme, & Renkert, 2009). In a healthy father-child relationship, both of these characteristics are part of the relationship.

From the moment that children are born and experience close and warm interaction with their father, a crucial role is already being filled. Rohner and Veneziano (2001) concluded that a fathers' love is equally as important to a child as mothers' love.

When researching the impact that fathers have on their children, there are so many variables that must be accounted for. Research has shown that even though a broken marriage may have a negative impact on the life of a child, the child still benefits substantially to parents (especially fathers) who are willing to maintain an invested relationship. A study of the influence

of non-residential fathers on their children displayed that there is great importance for fathers to have a strong bond with their children even after they no longer live in the same household. The same study displayed that paternal warmth and support had a positive influence on the quality of the father-child relationship especially in early and middle childhood (Harper & Fine, 2006). Ultimately, it is important to note that children are in need of positive paternal figures, even after a marriage is dissolved.

### **Father Absence**

Research gives evidence that the relationships between fathers and children are changing in America. Within the past decade, a trend has been shifting for women to be more independent, be more likely to have professional lives, and to raise children on their own (Corcoran, 2005). Increasing roles of mothers has created an influence on the relationship that fathers have with their children. Research has shown that this change sometimes results in lower levels of contact and lower quality of relationships between father and children. Because of these changing roles, often the reason for an absent father is not necessarily due to the father's choices to alienate himself from his children (Corcoran, 2005).

Regardless of the reasons of the absent father, it is evident that a distance in the father-child has a number of effects on children. Studies on absent fathers have shown a variety of results. When socioeconomic status is not accounted for, children who are raised without a father tend to display low levels of self-concept, lower academic motivation and achievement, lower moral development, riskier sexual behavior, higher rates of incarceration, and developmental or psychological disorders (Burns, 2008; Ellis, Bates, Dodge, Fergusson, Horwood, Pettit, & Woodward, 2003; Harper & McLanahan, 2004; Krohn, & Bogan, 2001; Mott, Kowaleski-Jones, & Menaghan, 1997; Perrin, Baker, Romelus, Jones, & Heesacker, 2009).

Father hunger is also a term that has been associated with the distance between a father and child relationship. Father hunger refers to both an emotional and psychological longing for a relationship with a paternal figure in a child's life. Some studies have shown that, while father hunger is likely to occur for children whose fathers are non-residential, it may also occur when the marriage relationship is still intact but a father has distanced himself from his children. Some researchers have suggested that father hunger can be the cause for "sexual promiscuity, violence, to be diagnosed with substance abuse, depression, schizophrenia, and eating disorders" (Perrin, Baker, Romelus, Jones, & Heesacker, 2009). While these are extreme cases, literature is consistent in suggesting that a father's presence and involvement is a crucial aspect of a child's healthy and normal development. The developmental adjustment is seen to benefit from the general structure and discipline that a healthy father figure tends to provide (Perrin, Baker, Romelus, Jones, & Heesacker, 2009).

### **Other Factors**

There is a variety of literature that focuses on the marginalization of fathers, especially in the social service setting. Research done in America found that social workers were identifying 88% of fathers in the cases of the study sample, however only 55% of the fathers were contacted or encouraged to be involved in the case procedure (Sieber, 2008). There is a disconnect between the need for fathers to be in the lives of their children and the way in which social services encourages that they be part of it (Clapton, 2009; Stephenson & Loewenthal, 2006). When there is a family concern, the whole system is affected and must be involved in order for treatment to be completely effective.

It is important to note that when referring to the presence or absence of a father, some research has shown that if children have a good relationship with their parent in a one-parent-

home, they grow up better adjusted than in a two-parent home where there is constant conflict (Zastrow & Kirschen-Ashman, 2010, p. 522). Research supporting this view has also given evidence that it is better for a parent to be absent from the child's life than to be part of it but act distant, aggressive, and confrontational (Hetherington, 1980).

### **Limitations**

The limitations of these studies are that they often rely on the qualitative perspectives of parents to create the data. Qualitative perspectives generally decrease levels of reliability and validity in research, making it difficult to formulate accurate conclusions. Other limitations include up-to-date research on emerging trends of modern families. The family system is rapidly changing and there is a severe lack of statistical research to help outline the areas of most need.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

When it comes to family systems, there are a number of theories relevant to their proper functioning. The most relevant theory to this topic is the family systems theory. Generally a system consists of a number of connected parts that function as a whole but change throughout time. When applied to the concept of family, a family system involves individuals who have relationships with each other and who are interrelated in some form or another. In this system, different aspects have different types of relationships, however ultimately each aspect of the system has an effect on the entire system. The system is constantly changing and shifting and it is up to the individual parts to work together and maintain the balance of the large framework (Zastrow & Kirschen-Ashman, 2010, p. 156-157).

The second theory that is directly related to the family systems theory is called homeostasis. Homeostasis can be explained as the tendency for a system to remain fairly stable and balanced (Zastrow & Kirschen-Ashman, 2010, p. 157). It is important to apply this theory to the

topic of father-child relationship because the threat to homeostasis often also associated with a threat to this same relationship. A threat to homeostasis is often best dealt with through a formal intervention such as counseling or through the use of a social worker. Professionals often have a good sense of the balance that must be maintained in the family system and they can help to regain balance when a system shifts.

According to Zastrow and Kirschen-Ashman (2010, p. 159), entropy is “the natural tendency of a system to progress toward disorganization, depletion, and in essence, death”.

Acknowledging a tendency towards disorganization helps to highlight the need for proper education and to bring a continued awareness towards how a family system is functioning. After a significant change in the system, it may be easy to allow things to naturally resort to homeostasis, however sometimes a system requires extra assistance and guidance. This process may require counseling or the assistance of a social worker.

### **Gaps in the Research**

There are gaps in research when it comes to paternal fathers who are single parents and the impact that the non-cohabitating maternal relationship has on the development of the children. There are varieties of areas in the research of absent fathers that still need to be covered. A few studies have looked at the impact that economic status has on the absent father problem; however this topic requires a greater amount of research. Although it is a growing trend, there is still limited research on the impact that having no father figure at all has on children.



## **Conclusion and Position**

### **Summary of Literature Review**

A review of current literature has indicated that there is a growing quantity of children being raised without strong paternal figures. Although father absence may be best in some cases, research has shown that this is not always the case. A number of studies have suggested that there are potential negative effects on children who experience a lack of involvement from their fathers. Even though there are potential negative effects caused by lack of paternal figures in the lives of children, studies also suggest that it is more beneficial for children to be sheltered from father figures if they do not display healthy emotional support.

Father hunger is a recently coined term that has been used to describe the emotional and psychological longing that children have for a relationship with their father. This area of research has led to a number of studies on the impact that father involvement has on children. Current literature emphasizes the need for education and training of families to maintain healthy parent-child relationships (particularly father-child relationships) even if parent relationships do not remain whole.

### **Recommendations**

After conducting a literature review on a variety of effects that paternal absence has on children, there are a number of recommendations that are directed towards social workers, Christians, and the families in America.

The first recommendations are directed towards public social service workers and mental health workers. In this department there is the need for better educational programs and informational resources for family systems that are experiencing a shift in the system (ie: divorce or separation of parents). When a break in the family system occurs, it is vital that family

members receive education on their continued roles and responsibilities as moving parts in the family system. Knowing that each member (especially the parents) play important roles in the lives of their children may not only help to maintain a healthy family dynamic after separation, but may also encourage the continued involvement of the non-cohabitating parent.

Social workers should also be aware of the importance of involving paternal figures in the practice setting of family treatment. By training social workers to avoid the marginalization of fathers throughout treatment, it is hopeful that families will become more willing to agree upon positive father involvement even in broken families. This would not only encourage the balance of a changing family system, but would possibly help avoid issues of father hunger and other negative effects of paternal absence.

The second recommendations are directed towards Christians and particularly Seventh-Day Adventists. Within the SDA church divorce is often frowned upon and this has the potential to result in the marginalization of fathers, particularly when mothers gain custody of the children after divorce. Even though there is not a great amount of statistical evidence behind this, it is still suggested that better Christian resources be created for families who are experiencing divorce. Having stronger support systems would potentially decrease the marginalization of fathers (or the leaving parent) in these Christian families and teach effective methods for maintaining child-parent relationships after separation occurs. Creating a place where openness is encouraged may help to acknowledge the need for parents to maintain their focus on the children even when the family system is shifting.

The third recommendation is focused on family systems, particularly those that are shifting during a divorce or separating of parents. These shifting family systems are encouraged to reflect on the information gathered about the importance that each parental figure plays in the

lives of their children. Acknowledging each member's importance would be a possibly vital aspect of keeping the children's wellbeing a priority and ensuring that their emotional and psychological needs are met even through times of significant change.

It is also recommended that parents consider receiving assistance from public social services to help maintain the system in as much equilibrium as possible. Even though a shift is inevitable, it is most often vital that both paternal and maternal relationships with children remain intact. Social workers may have very useful resources for families experiencing this change and may help to aid or mediate the situation towards healthy solutions.

### **Goals and Objectives of Position**

The primary goal and objective of the discussed position is to help educate families on the researched importance of father-child relationships. Often this importance has been neglected as a result of lack of education and blatant marginalization of fathers in counseling or social work treatment. By focusing on this relationship in particular, it is hoped that families will re-evaluate their systems and acknowledge some possible improvements could be made to maintain the wholeness of the system.

### **Strategies and Outcomes of Position**

Because this is a diverse and often sensitive issue, the strategies are more general and have focused more on self-education than anything. By becoming aware of the research and statistics, families will hopefully be more conscious of the importance of father figures in the lives of children. This position also encourages social workers to involve healthy father figures in the treatment of broken families if it is in favor of the well-being of children. Staying up-to-date on current research is a very beneficial way of ensuring that social work practice is best helping each part of the family system to play their vital role.

**Inspiring Change**

Above are many recommendations for a variety of areas. In order to put these recommendations into action, there needs to be a realistic way to inspire change. A micro level of change can occur in two areas of the recommendations that were made; both the social workers and the family systems. Note that mental health workers may also be included in this area. It is re-emphasized that social workers focus on paternal involvement when treating families. This may be a change for some social workers because research has shown that the marginalization of fathers throughout the treatment of children and families has been a consistent trend for many years in America (Sieber, 2008). Micro change in this area can be directly displayed by intentionally making the involvement of both parents as part of the conversation that occurs especially directly after a major change in the system (such as divorce). This also correlates with the other area of micro change that is encouraged, the family system. Even though this is also a mezzo area, single family systems and especially mother-father relationships can be considered a micro area. Simply staying educated and maintaining healthy communication within the system will help to ensure that paternal relationships are kept as a priority even when fathers are the non-cohabitating parent. On the micro level, self-education is the best way for change to occur.

Change in a mezzo system often is directly involved with a macro system. As mentioned above, education is a key aspect of inspiring change in this area. Training that addresses the importance of child-father relationships should be part of a social workers/mental health workers continued education. Because this seems to be an avoided topic, it is important that this area is focused on. Families come to social service workers to get help and it is important that social

workers are able to involve the entire system (assuming that this is the healthiest option for the family).

Macro level of change is often the hardest to inspire because it involves the most people, but can make the most difference. Change on a macro level needs to be made on community resources available to families and the education they receive, not only when they first have children, but when the family system changes and the parent roles shift.

To date there is still somewhat limited research on the need for fathers to be involved with their children. There is need for more in-depth quantitative and qualitative research in this area. As a whole, this issue requires a great amount of attention as the dynamic of families continue to shift. It is important for social workers to mark the changes occurring in modern families and to emphasize the importance of educating the growing gaps in failing family systems.

### References

- Burns, V. (2008). Living Without a Strong Father Figure: A Context for Teen Mothers' Experience of Having Become Sexually Active. *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 29(3), 279-297. doi:10.1080/01612840701869692
- Clapton, G. (2009). How and Why Social Work Fails Fathers: Redressing an Imbalance, Social Work's Role and Responsibility. *Practice (09503153)*, 21(1), 17-34. doi:10.1080/09503150902745989
- Combs-Orme, T., & Renkert, L. E. (2009). Fathers and Their Infants: Caregiving and Affection in the Modern Family. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 19(4), 394-418. doi:10.1080/10911350902790753
- Corcoran, M. P. (2005). Portrait of the 'absent' father: the impact of non-residency on developing and maintaining a fathering role. *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 14(2), 134-154. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.
- DeBell, M. (2008). Children Living Without Their Fathers: Population Estimates and Indicators of Educational Well-being. *Social Indicators Research*, 87(3), 427-443. doi:10.1007/s11205-007-9149-8
- Ellis, B. J., Bates, J. E., Dodge, K. A., Fergusson, D. M., John Horwood, L. L., Pettit, G. S., & Woodward, L. (2003). Does Father Absence Place Daughters at Special Risk for Early Sexual Activity and Teenage Pregnancy?. *Child Development*, 74(3), 801-821. doi:10.1111/1467-8624.00569
- Harper, C. C., & McLanahan, S. S. (2004). Father Absence and Youth Incarceration. *Journal of Research on Adolescence (Blackwell Publishing Limited)*, 14(3), 369-397. doi:10.1111/j.1532-7795.2004.00079.x

- Harper, S. E., & Fine, M. A. (2006). The Effects of Involved Nonresidential Fathers' Distress, Parenting Behaviors, Inter-Parental Conflict, and the Quality of Father-Child Relationships on Children's Well-Being. *Fathering: A Journal of Theory, Research, & Practice about Men as Fathers*, 4(3), 286-311. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.
- Hetherington, E.M. (1980). Children and Divorce. In R. Henderson (Ed), *Parent-Child Interaction: Theory Research, and Prospect*. New York: Academic Press.
- Horn, W., & Bush, A. (2003). Fathers, Marriage, and the Next Phase of Welfare Reform. *Acton Institute Policy Forum*, 3, retrieved March 28, 2011, from [http://www.acton.org/ppolicy/forum/no3\\_full.html](http://www.acton.org/ppolicy/forum/no3_full.html).
- Krohn, F. B., & Bogan, Z. (2001). The Effects Absent Fathers Have on Female Development and College Attendance. *College Student Journal*, 35(4), 598. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.
- McLanahan, S., & Teitler, J. (1999). The Consequences of Father Absence. In M. Lamb (Ed.), *Parenting and Child Development in "Nontraditional" Families* (pp. 83–102). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Mott, F. L., Kowaleski-Jones, L., & Menaghan, E. G. (1997). Paternal Absence and Child Behavior: Does a Child's Gender Make a Difference?. *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 59(1), 103-118. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.
- Perrin, P. B., Baker, J. O., Romelus, A. M., Jones, K. D., & Heesacker, M. (2009). Development, validation, and confirmatory factor analysis of the Father Hunger Scale. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 10(4), 314-327. doi:10.1037/a0017277
- Rohner, R. P., & Veneziano, R. A. (2001). The importance of father love: History and contemporary evidence. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(4), 382–405.

- Sieber, D. (2008). Engaging Absent Fathers in the Treatment of Children. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 36(4), 333-340. doi:10.1007/s10615-008-0158-0
- Skevik, A. (2006). 'Absent fathers' or 'reorganized families'? Variations in father-child contact after parental break-up in Norway. *Sociological Review*, 54(1), 114-132. doi:10.1111/j.1467-954X.2006.00604.x
- Stephenson, S. S., & Loewenthal, D. D. (2006). The Effect on Counseling/Psychotherapy Practice of an Absent Father in the Therapist's Childhood: A Heuristic Study. *Psychodynamic Practice*, 12(4), 435-452. doi:10.1080/14753630600958304
- Sutton, P. D., & Munson, M. L. (2008). Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data for July 2007. National Vital Statistics Reports (Vol. 56). Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.
- Zastrow, H., Charles and Karen K. Kirschen-Ashman. (2010). *Understanding human behavior in the social environment (8th ed.)*. Brooks/Cole, CA