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## **THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGAGING FATHERS IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

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The Importance of Engaging Fathers in Social Work Practice

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## Introduction

According to 2011 U.S. Census Bureau data, over 24 million children live apart from their biological fathers. That is 1 out of every 3 (33%) children in America. Nearly 2 in 3 (64%) African American children live in father-absent homes. One in three (34%) Hispanic children, and 1 in 4 (25%) white children live in father-absent homes. In 1960, only 11% of children lived in father-absent homes.

Children who live absent their biological fathers are, on average, at least two to three times more likely to be poor, to use drugs, to experience educational, health, emotional and behavioral problems, to be victims of child abuse, and to engage in criminal behavior than their peers who live with their married, biological (or adoptive) parents (<http://www.fatherhood.org/media/fatherhood-statistics>).

The research is clear that children do better in every measure of development when there is a responsibly involved father in their lives. Fathers play a unique and undeniably important role in the lives of their children. As Christians in social work practice, we view the roles of fathers from a biblical perspective. The research only confirms the importance of fathers as God intended to be to their children. It also reveals the consequences in the lives of children, and the society we live in, when fathers are out of the position God created them to be in

This paper will present relevant research and significant data that indicates the importance of father's involvement in the lives of their children. In addition, special attention will be focused on the challenge, reluctance, and in many cases, the resistance, to engaging fathers in social service provision, as well as biblical principles on the importance of engaging fathers.

Those who are engaged in social work practice are involved in the lives of children from infancy through adolescence. In many cases, it is necessary for child welfare workers to become involved during the prenatal stages if the biological parents already have a history with them. Social worker practice may begin with interventions with children in hospital pre-natal units, emergency rooms, Early Head Start programs, Head Start programs, schools, mental health agencies, and juvenile detention centers.

Social work practice with children and families has changed over the last several decades to reflect the changes in our society, culture, the effects of poverty, health care or lack of, media, pop-culture, and family dynamics. A great deal of those changes surrounds working with the fathers. Popenoe, (as cited by Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, U.S. Children's Bureau Rosenberg, Wilcox, 2006)said:

Fathers are far more than just 'second adults' in the home . . . Involved fathers bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring. Fathers have a direct impact on the well-being of their children. It is important for professionals working with fathers—especially in the difficult, emotionally charged arena in which child protective services (CPS) caseworkers operate—to have a working understanding of the literature that addresses this impact.

Blankenhorn (as cited in Muehlenberg. B, 1996).wrote:

Thirty years ago American Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote a report called “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action”. In it he wrote these words: “The breakup of the black family is the single most important social fact of the United States today.” The central insight of his report was that family stability should be the basis of social legislation. Said Moynihan, “A community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any set of rational expectations about the future - that community asks for and gets chaos

Sociologist Charles Murray has warned that white families are heading in the same direction, and we will soon see the emergence of a white underclass. “Illegitimacy,” he warns, “is the single

most important social problem of our time - more important than crime, drugs, poverty, illiteracy, welfare or homelessness because it drives everything else” (as cited in Blankenhorn, 1995). In 1995, President Bill Clinton stated, “The single biggest social problem in our society may be the growing absence of fathers from their children’s homes, because it contributes to so many other social problems” (Father Facts, 1996, p. 11). Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich stated in a press release announcing the congressional task force on fatherhood in 1997:

When children and families suffer an absent father, society as a whole suffers. Children living without a father are more likely to have trouble in school, become an unwed parent or involved with gangs or drugs. It is important not only that we recognize the severe implications of fatherlessness in America, but that we create a climate in which committed fatherhood is valued and supported, loving fathers are encouraged ... Fathers must be there for their sons and daughters (Father Facts, 1996, p. 11).

Virtually every major social pathology has been linked to fatherlessness: violent crime, drug and alcohol abuse, truancy, teen pregnancy, suicide—all correlate more strongly to fatherlessness than to any other single factor (Baskerville, 2002). Kunjufu (2001) wrote:

Research confirms that the most significant factor in the life of a child is not race or family income, but whether the father is at home . . . As significant as race and economics are in America, they do not compare to the destructive impact of fatherlessness in America.

- ❖ Sixty-three percent of youth that commit suicide are from fatherless homes
- ❖ Ninety percent of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes
- ❖ Eighty-five percent of all children that exhibit behavioral disorders come from fatherless homes
- ❖ Eighty percent of rapist with displaced anger come from fatherless homes
- ❖ Seventy-one percent of all high school dropouts come from fatherless homes
- ❖ Seventy-five percent of all adolescent patients in chemical abuse centers come from fatherless homes
- ❖ Seventy percent of juveniles in state-operated institutions come from fatherless homes
- ❖ Eighty-two percent of all youths sitting in prisons grew up in fatherless homes
- ❖ Eighty-two percent of teenage girls who get pregnant come from fatherless homes. (p. 157)

In light of an abundance of evidence that supports the fact that responsibly involved fathers are vital to the positive outcomes in the lives of their children, let me interject here to say, it is my opinion, that single mothers can and have for quite some time now, raised children who have had very successful outcomes in their lives. Mothers can do a tremendous job at teaching sons and daughters to be responsible, respectful, and productive. They can teach their children to make good decisions, use good judgment, and to know right from wrong. They can instill good character, and teach them to live a life of integrity. But a mother cannot role model for a boy how to be a man. A boy needs to see his father role model the behavior of a man of integrity and respect. A boy needs to see his father handle the responsibilities of a man, husband and a father. A boy will walk in his father's footsteps long before he adheres to the words of wisdom from his mother.

It is also my opinion that a daughter should learn how to be a woman from her mother or another woman. Her father should not be her role model for a woman. However, her father is her first role model of how a man is to behave and treat her with respect. When daughters see their fathers treat their mothers with love and respect, they learn to expect the same from the men that they will someday date and/or marry. When daughters see their fathers go to work every day, and handle the responsibilities as a provider, protector, nurturer, encourager, and sustainer, it is likely they will not accept anything less from the man they will someday marry. If men sell or use drugs around their daughters, it will be acceptable for them to date someone who does drugs. If they are in a gang, and their daughters are around that activity, it will be okay for her to date someone who is involved in a gang. If their daughter visits them in prison every weekend, it will

be acceptable for her to take her children to visit their father in prison. The cycle becomes repetitive.

Mothers and fathers are equally important to the holistic development of their children. But the research is clear. Children do better in every measure of development when there is a responsibly involved father in their lives. For that reason, it is important that social workers, child welfare workers, child therapist, and fatherhood practitioners across the nation are made aware of the importance of engaging fathers in social work practice.

It does not matter what life stage or practice setting you intervene in the life of children. What is important is that there was a father that contributed, whether directly or indirectly, to the circumstances that required your intervention. He was either present or absent, responsibly or irresponsibly involved, or completely uninvolved. In either circumstance it is undeniably necessary to engage and solicit his involvement in the intervention plan of action, as long as he does not pose a threat to the safety of the child.

Referring back to the statistics mentioned earlier regarding consequence for children who grow up in fatherless home, let's examine them as they relate to the various practice settings social workers, therapists, and child protective service workers should not only consider engaging fathers, but should find it crucial to the successful attainment of treatment goals.

### **Child Abuse**

Fragile Families Research Brief No.46 (as cited in Father Facts, 2011, p. 68), reported

A study using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study revealed that in many cases the absence of a biological father contributes to increased risk of child maltreatment. The results suggest that Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies have some justification in viewing the presence of a social father as increasing children's risk of abuse and neglect. It is believed that in families with a non-biological (social) father figure, there is a higher risk of abuse and neglect to children, despite the social father living in the household or only dating the mother.

This study suggests that the responsible involvement of the biological father serves as a protector to his children from the mother's male friends and even stepfathers. When the biological father is separated from his children, but remains involved with his children, any men that the mother is involved with must consider the presence of the biological father, and therefore must think about the father's reaction before doing any harm to his children.

## **Crime**

Knoester & Hayne's Community context, social integration into family, and youth violence (as cited in Father Facts, 2011, p. 69), reports:

A study using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health explored the relationship between family structure and risk of violent acts in neighborhoods. The results revealed that if the number of fathers is low in a neighborhood, then there is an increase in acts of teen violence. The statistical data showed that a 1 percent increase in the proportion of single-parent families in a neighborhood is associated with a 3 percent increase in an adolescent's level of violence. In other words, adolescents who live in neighborhoods with lower proportions of single-parent families and who report higher levels of family integration commit less violence.

## **Drug and Alcohol Use**

Brook, W., Brook, J., Rubenstone, Zhang, & Gerochi, Cigarette smoking in the adolescent children of drug-abusing fathers, (as cited in Father Facts, 2011, p. 69) reported:

A study of 296 at-risk adolescents whose fathers were drug abusers revealed that paternal smoking and drug use lead to strained father-child relationships. This weakened relationship led to greater adolescent maladjustment with family and friends and a higher risk for adolescent drug use and smoking. Fathers who smoke cigarettes were less likely to enforce antismoking rules for their children and had weaker bonds in terms of adolescent admiration and emulation.

## **Education**

Father involvement in schools is associated with the higher likelihood of a student getting mostly A's. This was true for fathers in biological parent families, for stepfathers, and for fathers heading single-parent families. Fatherless children are twice as likely to drop out of school. Having a father involved on a personal level with his child's schooling increases the likelihood of his child's achievement.

When fathers assume a positive role in their child's education, students feel a positive impact. (<http://www.fatherhood.org/fathers/how-to-be-a-dad/get-involved-in-your-childs-education>)

### **Emotional and Behavioral Problems**

One study of school-aged children found that children with good relationships with their fathers were less likely to experience depression, to exhibit disruptive behavior, or to lie and were more likely to exhibit pro-social behavior. This same study found that boys with involved fathers had fewer school behavior problems and that girls had stronger self-esteem. (<http://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/fatherhood/chaptertwo.cfm>)

### **Poverty**

Children in father-absent homes are almost four times more likely to be poor. In 2011, 12 percent of children in married-couple families were living in poverty, compared to 44 percent of children in mother-only families (<http://www.fatherhood.org/media/consequences-of-father-absence-statistics>).

### **Teen Pregnancy and Sexuality**

Burn's Living without a strong father figure: A context for teen mothers' experience of having become sexually active (as cited in Father Facts, 2011, p. 75) reported:

In a phenomenological study of adolescent mothers' experiences of having become sexually active, it was revealed that teen mothers' experiences of living without a strong father figure were an important factor for having become sexually active. Based on the study findings, the inability to bond in satisfactory ways with a father or father figure may result in earlier onset of sexual activity and the higher risk of teen pregnancy.

The research and data included in this paper reveal the importance of engaging fathers in many areas of social work practice. If the statistics on the consequences of father absences on their children have not convinced you of the importance of engaging fathers in social work practice, then perhaps this statistics may:

The Federal Government spent at least \$99.8 billion providing assistance to father-absent families in 2006. \$99.8 billion is the amount the Federal government spent on thirteen means-tested benefit programs and on child support enforcement for single mothers. These programs include the Earned Income Tax Credit, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), child support enforcement, food and nutrition programs, housing programs, Medicaid, and the State Children's Health Insurance Plan (SCHIP) (<http://www.fatherhood.org/media/fatherhood-statistics/one-hundred-billion-dollar-man-download>).

### **Barriers and Challenges to Fathers Involvement**

Historically fathers have had an adversarial relationship with social services.

For despite a decade of attention, little attempt has been made to account for where the fatherhood crisis comes from in the first place. While it doubtless has a number of contributing social and economic causes that stretch back decades, there is evidence that the critical dimensions it has assumed in the last decade proceed at least in part from public policy, and that the problem should be seen less as sociological or psychological and more as political.

What is neglected is the large governmental machinery that has arisen at the federal, state, and local levels—and abroad—to address family issues. Extensive executive-branch agencies administer not only welfare but child protection, child-support enforcement, and other quasi-police functions. Yet the linchpin of this machinery is the judiciary: the little-understood system of family courts, which have arisen during the last 40 years (Baskerville, 2002).

Aid to Families and Dependent Children (AFDC), the social welfare policy derived out of the Social Security act of 1935, and later replaced in 1996 with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) contributed to the disenfranchisement of fathers from the family. Typically, only very poor families composed of single mothers and their children qualified for AFDC. This feature led some to argue that the program discouraged marriage and work. To be eligible for AFDC, a family had to include a dependent child who was under age 18, was a citizen or permanent legal resident, and could be considered deprived of parental support—usually because no father lived in the home (Page, Larner, 1997, p. 21)

Fatherless families are a growing problem, but the principal cause is not bad behavior or the fault of fathers; it is government policies with respect to divorce and child support (Baskerville, 2004).

There are good fathers out there that have gone through a divorce who are willing to pay their child support payments on time and are being victimized by mothers who deny them their visitations. Good fathers who understand and take responsibilities for their obligations should be rewarded, not punished. The system generally (in most cases) favors the mother and treats the father like a dead beat dad (<http://www.child-support-laws-state-by-state.com/fathers-rights.html>).

Now, a new study finds that mothers do play an important role both in encouraging and curtailing fathers' involvement. And this maternal gatekeeping is a powerful force: Even fathers who wanted to be involved with their kids often drifted away in the face of persistent maternal criticism (Raeburn, 2008).

Historically, child welfare is viewed as a practice that takes place between women (Davies, 2005; Scourfield, 2006). With parenting viewed as a feminine responsibility, child welfare practice focuses primarily on mothers and largely ignores fathers (Walmsley, Brown, Callahan, Dominelli, & Strega, 2011). However, the safety of children could be bolstered by the recognition that men can—and often do—take on meaningful roles in the lives of children. Child welfare services that target families need to acknowledge that fathers play significant roles in the lives of their children and should seek out new ways to involve fathers in services (Walmsley et al., 2011) (as cited in Lee, Yelick, Brisebois, & Banks, 2011).

Sonenstien, Malm, & Billing, (2002) *Study of fathers' involvement in permanency planning and child welfare casework* reveals:

Fathers have, traditionally, not been as involved in child welfare case planning as mothers. Worker bias regarding father involvement appears to be the most widely researched barrier to fathers' participation in child welfare case planning. One study found that caseworkers did not pay attention to birth fathers to the degree that they did to birth mothers. At the same time, the fathers did not respond to outreach efforts as well as mothers, which testifies to the need to approach fathers with an understanding of their unique needs and feelings. At least in this one study, caseworkers were found to require that fathers demonstrate their connection to the child whereas the mothers' connection was taken for granted. Of course, characteristics of fathers who do not live with their children also can contribute to the difficulties in successfully engaging fathers—

incarceration, homelessness, substance abuse, to name a few (as cited in Rosenberg, Wilcox, 2006, p. 29).

NASW has over 152,000 members, almost 80% of whom are women (<http://www.naswdc.org>).

### **Biblical Principles for Engaging Fathers**

There are many books on fatherhood. There are tons of research on fatherhood, the importance of the roles of fathers, the consequences of father absence on children, families, communities, societies, and nations. All of them reveal important, riveting, alarming, and even frightening facts surrounding the state of fatherhood in our nations. They all offer a variety of causes of father absence, potential strategies and solutions to reducing father absence. In many cases those strategies and solutions produce initial success to a degree in many incidences. Many fathers have been helped to get back on point, and seem to have overcome personal and systemic barriers to responsible fatherhood. Many of those men fall victim once again to circumstances, situations, and scenarios (life on life's terms) that caused him to be out of position in the first place. **The source** of his problems have not been revealed and confronted, making his apparent success only temporary.

As Christian social work practitioners, we need to have a biblical bases for understanding the origins of a father's challenges to being responsibly involved in the life of his children. The bible says in Matthew 12:43-45:

*When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest, and findeth none. Then he saith, I will return into my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, swept, and garnished. Then goeth he, and taketh with himself seven other spirits more wicked*

*than himself, and they enter in and dwell there: and the last state of that man is worse than the first. Even so shall it be also unto this wicked generation.*

We must train fathers both in the natural and supernaturally to be adequately able to sustain himself against the reoccurring attacks of his adversary. Ephesians 6: 10-12 says,

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.*

If a man does not know the source of his problems, or who his enemy is, he will not know how to plan to defeat and conquer them. It is because of a lack of knowledge, understanding, and wisdom that fathers are unable to obtain, maintain, and sustain their place in their children's lives. It is a lack of knowledge of their true identity, purpose, and authority. Knowledge without understanding of how to use it to your advantage leads to destruction. Wisdom comes from understanding the knowledge you have and exercising it in your daily life. The bible reveals God's original purpose, and meaning of fatherhood. The bible details the original blueprint for the purpose and design of all fathers by the Creator of all mankind, God the Father. God explains the purpose of fathers, the roles of fathers, and the root source or cause of father absence (being out of position).

When I ask fathers why are they not involved in the lives of their children, the number one response is, "I didn't have a father in my life, so I do not know how to be a father to my children". Psalms 82:5 says, "*They know not, neither will they understand; they walk on in darkness: all the foundations of the earth are out of course*". Darkness in your life usually reflects evil times; times when you encounter internal conflict, adversity, trials, and tribulation. You have a dark view of your future, no vision, no knowledge or understanding of where you are

headed, which can be very depressing. This is what is occurring with many fathers who have grown up without a father in their lives.

How do you help fathers walk out of the darkness in their life? As indicated in the scripture, the lack of knowledge and understanding about being a responsibly involved father can cause problems in their life and they will be a failure as a father. Having the knowledge and understanding of their purpose as a father can lead them out of dark times and into their destiny as a father. How do they restore the foundations of the earth? Mat. 4:16 says, *“The people which sat in darkness saw great light; and to them which sat in the region and shadow of death light is sprung up”*. 1Cor.3:11 says, *“For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ”*. Mal 4:6 says, *“And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse”*.

As Christian social workers, it is our responsibility to guide fathers back into position, out of darkness and into the light. That light is the knowledge of and acceptance of Jesus Christ into their lives. Matthew 28:18-20 says,

*And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”*

The curse has been in effect for thousands of years. It did not just begin with dads today and their children, or with their father and his father, and his father before him. It is just not good enough to be as good a father as fathers were forty years ago, or even a hundred years ago. Exodus. 20:5 says, *“...for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me”*. The fruit of fatherlessness is disobedient children. Fathers must be restored with knowledge and understanding of their purpose as fathers in order for their disobedient children to see them as

wise men that they are willing to follow in their footsteps in order to break the curse. God wants godly fathers to prepare their children for the Lord. Luke 1:17 says,

*“And he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord”.*

What we see today in our society and in the behaviors of youth was prophesied in Isaiah about what will happen if men/fathers remain out of position. Isaiah 3:4-5 says, *“I will make mere youths their officials; children will rule over them.” People will oppress each other—man against man, neighbor against neighbor. The young will rise up against the old, the nobody against the honored.* Isaiah 3:12 says, *Youths oppress my people, women rule over them. My people, your guides lead you astray; they turn you from the path.*

## **Conclusion**

The research presented provides empirical evidence on the importance of the roles fathers play on the holistic development of their children. Children can, and do, become productive adults growing up in single mother households. However, when children who live absent their biological fathers are, on average, at least two to three times more likely to be poor, to use drugs, to experience educational, health, emotional and behavioral problems, to be victims of child abuse, and to engage in criminal behavior than their peers who live with their married, biological (or adoptive) parents (<http://www.fatherhood.org/media/fatherhood-statistics>), it becomes imperative that as social work practitioners we incorporate strategies to engage fathers when intervening in the lives of their children.

With 24 million children living apart from their biological fathers (2011 U.S. Census Bureau), it is likely that many of the children you service will come from a father absent home.

As Christian social work practitioners, it is imperative we understand the root source that causes fathers to be out of position in their children's lives (a demonic attack). It is equally important that we acknowledge a father's natural circumstances and be able to meet them where their natural needs are. When you, first, help them navigate through their natural systemic barriers and challenges, they will be more responsive to efforts to engage the spiritual darkness in their lives. Therefore, it is important that as Christian social work practitioners, you are grounded in your own faith in order to guide fathers out of darkness and into the Light that will reposition them in the lives of their children.

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