



Daughters & Dads Fact Sheet

Prepared for Dads4Kids www.dads4kids.org.au August 2014 by Bill Muehlenberg

With over a half century of solid social science research now in, we know quite clearly that children do best by every measure when raised by their own biological parents, preferably cemented by marriage. Not only is the evidence for all this overwhelming, but we also know that each individual parent - the mother and the father - plays a vital and unique role in the well-being of children. Each one contributes greatly to the rearing and raising of children.

Mothers and fathers are different, in other words, and each has a key role in shaping and developing the child. Let me look in more detail at just one aspect of this: the vital role of the father in his daughter's life. There are now thousands of studies on the importance of fathers in general, with full-length books also discussing this.¹ In particular, a dad brings unique and vitally important input into a daughter's life, and when dad is absent, the daughter suffers in many ways.

As already stated, the research on this is voluminous, so only a few highlights can here be offered. Father presence, input and affirmation all correlate with better outcomes for daughters. Many studies for example have shown a close connection between "the relationship between fatherly affirmation and a woman's self-esteem, fear of intimacy, comfort with womanhood and comfort with sexuality" as one study puts it.²

A researcher from Wake Forest University in America found that "fathers generally have as much or more influence than mothers on many aspects of their daughters' lives. For example, the father has the greater impact on the daughter's ability to trust, enjoy and relate well to the males in her life ... well-fathered daughters are usually more self-confident, more self-reliant, and more successful in school and in their careers than poorly-fathered daughters... Daughters with good relationships with their father are also less likely to develop eating disorders."³

Another study found that "there were statistically significant relationships between engagement and accessibility with the daughters' self-esteem and life satisfaction" and father involvement.⁴ And a further study from the US found a "relationship between father-daughter relationship quality and daughters' stress response".⁵

Another study made this claim: "Research has shown that daughters who are dissatisfied with their communication interactions with their fathers are more likely to be involved with bad peer relationships, have unpleasant romantic endeavors, and make poor or life-threatening decisions compared to daughters who are satisfied with their communication interactions with their fathers."⁶

The research also finds a host of issues surrounding sexual problems. When dads are absent, daughters get into all sorts of trouble in this area. Here are some of the findings. Studies from many different cultures have found that girls raised without fathers are more likely to be sexually active, and to start early sexual activity. Father-deprived girls "show precocious sexual interest, derogation of masculinity and males, and poor ability to maintain sexual and emotional adjustment with one male".⁷

A US study found that girls who grow up without fathers were "53 percent more likely to marry as teenagers, 111 percent more likely to have children as teenagers, 164 percent more likely to have a premarital birth, and 92 percent more likely to dissolve their own marriages."⁸

Another US study found that "father engagement seems to have differential effects on desirable outcomes by reducing the frequency of behavioural problems in boys and psychological problems in young women".⁹

New Zealand research has found that the absence of a father is a major factor in the early onset of puberty and teenage pregnancy. Dr Bruce Ellis, Psychologist in Sexual Development at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch found that one of the most important factors in determining early menarche is the father: "There seems to be something special about the role of fathers in regulating daughters' sexual development".¹⁰

A British study found that girls brought up by lone parents were twice as likely to leave home by the age of 18 as the daughters of intact homes; were three times as likely to be cohabiting by the age of 20; and almost three times as likely to have a birth out of wedlock.¹¹

Physical problems also can be noted when fathers are absent. A recent Australian study showed that obesity among girls in single-parent households continues to be a major problem. Deakin University health researchers studied nearly 9000 children aged between four and nine and found higher rates of overweight and obesity in girls from single-parent families than those in two-parent families.¹²

Brain development can even be impacted by fatherlessness. Dr Gabriella Gobbi carried out research on this at McGill University in Canada. A summary of her findings says this: "Growing up without a father could permanently alter the structure of the brain and produce children who are more aggressive and angry, scientists have warned. Children brought up only by a single mother have a higher risk of developing 'deviant behaviour', including drug abuse, new research suggests. It is also feared that growing up in a fatherless household could have a greater impact on daughters than on sons."¹³

Also, the likelihood of girls getting involved in antisocial and harmful behaviour is also increased because of father absence. As sociologist David Blankenhorn puts it, "If the evidence suggests that fatherless boys tend toward disorderly and violent behavior, it just as clearly suggests that fatherless girls tend toward personally and socially destructive relationships with men, including precocious sexual activity and unmarried motherhood."¹⁴ Here again a raft of studies can be appealed to.¹⁵

And as already noted, even something like one's hormones can be influenced by the presence or absence of fathers. As science writer Paul Raeburn, author of *Do Fathers Matter?* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), states, "Girls who grow up with an engaged, involved father have a reduced risk of early puberty, risky sexual behavior, and teen pregnancy. The explanation could be that fathers' scent alters the hormonal activity in their daughters."¹⁶

And a host of studies show that girls are far more at risk of sexual abuse when the father is not present. As but one example, a Finnish study of nearly 4,000 ninth-grade girls found that "stepfather-daughter incest was about 15 times as common as father-daughter incest".¹⁷

By way of summary, one author lists a number of reasons why fathers are so important to their daughters. These include:

- fathers shape their daughters' self esteem
- fathers influence their daughters' body image
- a father helps develop behavioural traits in his daughter
- fathers impact social traits in their daughters
- fathers help define future romantic relationships for their daughters
- fathers also help define non-romantic relationships¹⁸

There is so much research now out on this that entire volumes have been penned examining the data. Let me highlight just two such books. The first is *Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters* by American paediatrician Dr. Meg Meeker (Ballantine Books 2007). In it she demonstrates how vitally important a girl's relationship with her father is to her mental, physical and social development.

The second book is by Bruce Robison. *Daughters and Their Dads* (Macmillan Publishing, 2008) also focuses on this vital relationship. As Robison states in his opening chapter, "There is an incredible power in the father-daughter relationship, a power which strongly influences a woman's future for good or bad. Girls long for affection and affirmation from their fathers. The influence that fathers have on their daughters is profound and lasts for the whole of their lives and it creates a hole in their lives if it is absent.... Many published studies have confirmed the powerful effect that fathers have on daughters with few dissenting voices."

The evidence is clear: girls need their dads, and they suffer greatly in many respects when their biological father is absent.

Different Parenting Roles

Numerous experts have pointed out the many differences a mother and father bring to parenting. For example, family expert David Popenoe highlights the significance of dads: "Fathers are far more than just 'second adults' in the home. Involved fathers—especially biological fathers—bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring. They provide protection and economic support and male role models. They have a parenting style that is significantly different from that of a mother and that difference is important in healthy child development."¹⁹

By way of a summary, let me offer the work of another family researcher here. He has done a very nice job of compactly making the case for the need for both parents:

"Why Children Need a Male and Female Parent" by Glenn T. Stanton²⁰

- The cooperative input and influence of a male parent and a female parent is essential for proper child development.
- As fathering expert Dr. Kyle Pruett of the Yale Medical School explains in *Fatherneed: Why Father Care is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child*, "fathers do not mother."²¹ *Psychology Today* explains, "fatherhood turns out to be a complex and unique phenomenon with huge consequences for the emotional and intellectual growth of children."²² A father, as a male parent, brings unique contributions to the parenting project.
- Likewise, a mother, as a female, uniquely impacts the life and development of her child, as Dr. Brenda Hunter explains in her book, *The Power of Mother Love: Transforming Both Mother and Child*. Erik Erikson, a pioneer in the world of child psychology, explained that father love and mother love are qualitatively different kinds of love.²³

Mothers and Fathers parent Differently

- Dr. Pruett: By 8 weeks of age, infants can tell the difference between a male or female interacting with them. This diversity, in itself, provides children with a broader, richer experience of contrasting relational interactions—more so than for children who are raised by only one gender. Whether they realize it or not, children are learning at earliest age, by sheer experience, that men and women are different and have different ways of dealing with life, other adults and children.

Mothers and Fathers Play Differently

- Fathers tend to play *with*, and mothers tend to care *for*, children....Fathers encourage competition; mothers encourage equity. One style encourages independence while the other encourages security....Both provide security and confidence in their own ways by communicating love and physical intimacy.

Fathers Push Limits; Mothers Encourage Security

- Either of these parenting styles by themselves can be unhealthy. One can tend toward encouraging risk without consideration of consequences. The other tends to avoid risk, which can fail to build independence, confidence and progress. Joined together, they keep each other in balance and help children remain safe while expanding their experiences and confidence.

Mothers and Fathers Communicate Differently

- Father's talk tends to be more brief, directive and to the point. It also makes greater use of subtle body language. Mothers tend to be more descriptive, personal and verbally encouraging.

Fathers and Mothers Prepare Children for Life Differently

- Dads tend to see their child in relation to the rest of the world. Mothers tend to see the rest of the world in relation to their child.

Fathers Provide a Look at the World of Men; Mothers, the World of Women

- Girls and boys who grow up with a father are more familiar and secure with the curious world of men. Girls with involved, married fathers are more likely to have healthier relationships with boys in adolescence and men in adulthood because they learn from their fathers how proper men act toward women. They also learn from mom how to live in a woman's world. This knowledge builds emotional security and safety from the exploitation of predatory males.
- Mothers help boys understand the female world and develop a sensitivity toward women. They also help boys know how to relate and communicate with women.

Fathers and Mothers Teach Respect for the Opposite Sex

- FACT: A married father is substantially less likely to abuse his wife or children than men in any other category. This means that boys and girls with married fathers in the home learn, by observation, how men should treat women.
- The *American Journal of Sociology* finds that, "Societies with father-present patterns of child socialization produce men who are less inclined to exclude women from public activities than their counterparts in father-absent societies."²⁴
- Girls and boys with married mothers learn from their mothers what a healthy, respectful female relationship with men looks like.

Conclusion

When we disregard the gender distinctions of parental influence as unimportant or unnecessary, we seriously diminish the proper development of children. Kids need the active participation of a mother and a father, and both parents need to be true to their gender designs. Both bring different and equally important things to the parenting project. We impoverish children and society when we deny our kids the influence of a mother and father, because we limit their development into full, healthy adults.

¹ Books include David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America* (Basic Books, 1995) and David Popenoe, *Life Without Father* (The Free Press, 1996).

² Tanya S. Scheffler and Peter J. Naus, "The relationship between fatherly affirmation and a woman's self-esteem, fear of intimacy, comfort with womanhood and comfort with sexuality," *The Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Spring 1999, p. 39-45, p. 39.

³ Linda Nielsen, "College Daughters' Relationships with Their Fathers: A 15 Year Study," *College Student Journal*, March 2007, Vol. 41, No. 1 pp. 112-121.

⁴ Scott Allgood, Troy Beckert and Camille Peterson, "The Role of Father Involvement in the Perceived Psychological Well-Being of Young Adult Daughters: A Retrospective Study," *North American Journal of Psychology*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2012, p. 95.

⁵ Jennifer Byrd-Craven, et. al., "The father-daughter dance: the relationship between father-daughter relationship quality and daughters' stress response," *Journal of Family Psychology*, February 26, 2012, pp. 87-94.

⁶ Narissra Maria Punyanunt-Carter, "Father-Daughter Relationships: Examining Family Communication Patterns and Interpersonal Communication Satisfactio," *Communication Research Reports*, Vol. 25, No. 1, February 2008, pp. 23-33.

⁷ Patricia Draper and Henry Harpending, "Father absence and reproductive strategy: an evolutionary perspective," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 1982, pp. 255-273, p. 258.

⁸ Irwin Garfinkel and Sara S. McLanahan, *Single Mothers and Their Children: A New American Dilemma*. Washington: Urban Institute, 1986, pp. 30-31.

⁹ Anna Sarkadi, "Fathers' involvement and children's developmental outcomes: a systematic review of longitudinal studies," *Acta Paediatrica*, February 2008, Vol. 97, No. 2, pp. 153-158.

¹⁰ Cited in "Early Menarche," *Catalyst*, ABC TV, 2 October 2003.

¹¹ Kathleen Kiernan, cited in "The Bargain Breaks," *The Economist*, 26 Dec. 1992 - 8 Jan. 1993.

¹² Geoff Maslen, "Parent link in obesity problem," *The Age*, September 6, 2011.

¹³ Ben Spencer, "Growing up without a father can permanently alter the brain: Fatherless children are more likely to grow up angry and turn to drugs," *Daily Mail*, December 5, 2013. URL: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2518247/Growing-father-permanently-alter-BRAIN-Fatherless-children-likely-grow-angry-turn-drugs.html>

¹⁴ David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America*. Basic Books, 1995, p. 72.

¹⁵ See for example, E. Mavis Hetherington, "Effects of father absence on personality development in adolescent girls," *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1972, pp. 857-860.

¹⁶ Quoted in Joe McGonegal, "Do Fathers Matter: Alumni Books Podcast," *Slice of MIT*, June 10, 2014. URL: <http://slice.mit.edu/2014/06/10/fathers/>

¹⁷ Keikki Sariola and Antti Uetela, "The Prevalence and Context of Incest Abuse in Finland," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, Vol. 20, No. 9, 1996, pp. 843-850.

¹⁸ Kathleen Odenthal, "10 reasons fathers are so important to their daughters," *Hubpages*, August 14, 2014. URL: <http://kathleenodenthal.hubpages.com/hub/10-Reasons-Fathers-are-so-Important-to-their-Daughters>

¹⁹ David Popenoe, *Life Without Father*. The Free Press, 1996, p. 163.

²⁰ Adapted from this site: URL: <http://www.cfcidaho.org/why-children-need-male-and-female-parent>

²¹ Kyle D. Pruett, *Fatherneed: Why Father Care is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child*. New York: The Free Press, 2000, pp. 17-34.

²² "Shuttle Diplomacy," *Psychology Today*, July/August 1993, p. 15.

²³ As cited in Kyle D. Pruett, *The Nurturing Father*. New York: Warner Books, 1987, p. 49.

²⁴ Scott Coltrane, "Father-Child Relationships and the Status of Women: A Cross-Cultural Study," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 93, 1988, p. 1088.