



## Education

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# Let's talk about importance of fathers in children's lives

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“Fatherlessness is a wound that doesn’t go away. Everyone has a father. Even absent parents continue to impact a child’s life. And when we don’t know who the father is, kids still have questions. The absent parent is still in their life.”

What on this earth could be more important to kids than parents? Nothing.

Tonya Glantz was the one speaking above. A researcher and trainer at the Child Welfare Institute at Rhode Island College, she recently presented her work on fatherhood to the Infant Mental Health Association. Fathers are Glantz’s passion. This is huge because pundits and the public talk about fatherhood even less than mothering, except of course for their loud complaints about the bratty, disengaged, problematic results of poor parenting.

But complaining about parents doesn’t help kids. So what’s going on? Glantz’s data are startling.

Nationally, 33.5 percent of all American children have no contact with their biological father. Of the kids who live below the poverty line, that percentage climbs to one half. Rhode Island roughly mirrors the nation. That’s a lot of dads completely M.I.A.

Glantz’s review of the research shows that the consequences of fatherlessness include:

- Higher risk of poverty
- Higher risk of abuse and neglect
- Increased rates of juvenile delinquency
- Increased substance abuse
- Earlier sexual activity

- Higher dropout rates
- Lower grade-point average
- Lower college aspirations

Why are fathers so absent, sidelined or marginalized?

Apparently, child-welfare systems have been part of the problem. Glantz says that while social-service workers are getting better about involving dads in their children's lives, actually, "Fatherhood is a relatively new field. The Obama administration has brought new energy for looking at what makes healthy relationships, instead of the Bush administration's focus on marriage."

To a room of child-welfare professionals, she says bluntly, "When we think of the consequences of fatherlessness, we tend to go immediately to blame, and say the fathers don't want to be involved with their children. Actually, the research says to look in the mirror and ask questions about what WE'RE doing."

Sometimes social workers have no choice but to keep a child away from an abusive father, for safety reasons. But aside from those cases, "Mothers and the maternal relatives are the gatekeepers to decisions about the child's life. Children's records are linked to the name of the mother, even if she is deceased. There's a professional bias that tends to make us less likely to look for fathers, or to work with them. And dads have few rights if their names are not on the birth certificate. Some moms refuse to say who the father is. And among younger parents, the mother's family is a critical barrier" to the dad or his family having contact with the child. The girl's family may not like the boy or resent his part in the pregnancy.

So the man or boy is shoved out of the picture.

Most of us think of fathers as providers and disciplinarians. But when Dad isn't or can't be a good provider, he has no credibility, and often virtually no role in the family. For example, fathers who've been in prison have a horrible time getting jobs, and can feel helpless about becoming an authority in their children's lives.

But dads bring other huge contributions. For one thing, they play. That fatherly roughhousing that most kids love actually aids brain development. Play has been proven to enhance learning, and dads usually play with their kids more than moms. This play "promotes confidence in motor skills, courage, risk-taking and autonomy. It puts the kid on the path of healthy development and gives the child strong self-esteem," Glantz said. Even as they're wrestling with one another, the child can feel the love. And, "Dad's love is valuable like nothing else."

Also, dads help transition kids into reality. Glantz demonstrates: "Think of how dads hold a baby. Out there. Football hold. 'You're out there, kid, you can do stuff out in the real world.' And think of how dads talk. It feels like: 'You are here with me' as opposed to 'You are a part of me.' When a child does something wrong, most moms say 'I'm so disappointed.' They go right to the relationship stuff. Dad says, 'Look, if you hit, you'll get hit back.' He represents the natural consequences of actions."

Moms hold on tight, protectively. Dads let go and encourage healthy risk, while still being reassuring. The division of labor is not hard and fast, but both roles are needed. Statistically, kids do best in families, and strong families keep kids and dads connected.

Glantz was forthright: "Two-mom families sometimes get offended about the implications of this, but most [two-mom families] involve male family and friends in their children's lives. It's important for kids to have a balanced picture."

Don't misunderstand. Glantz says, "Fathers are not the end-all, be-all in a child's life, but they are a critical

piece. Father is a little piece of every kid. I would be advocating for mothers if they were as marginalized as dads.”

So however angry, resentful or blaming we may feel toward errant parents of either sex, Glantz reminds us they are still our best allies when trying to help kids succeed.

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