

# The Center for Successful Fathering

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## ***Father Involvement Reduces School Violence***

***By Dr. Ron Klinger***

*\* This article is a slightly edited version of Dr. Klinger's presentation to Texas Attorney General (now U.S. Senator) John Cornyn's Task Force on School Violence hearing, July 15, 1999, at the University of Texas – Downtown, San Antonio.*

For nearly 40 years America has been involved in a socio-cultural experiment without parallel in our history. Beginning in the early 1960's, fathers in our country began a migration from their families and from their children. With each passing decade, not hundreds or thousands or even hundreds of thousands, but millions of our children from different geographic regions, economic backgrounds, and ethnic heritage share the common experience of fatherlessness. America is the world leader of fatherless families.

Since World War II America has been involved in a variety of armed conflicts. Many fathers have died as a result of war. And yet, if we added together all of the children orphaned as a consequence of their father's death in military action, we would not even approach the 27 millions American children who celebrated the birth of the 21st century by going to sleep in a home where there is no father. Today, only 25% of our nation's children live with both their biological parents. As William Raspberry stated, "America has always had fatherless children, but this is the first time in our country that we have had entire fatherless neighborhoods."

Children need the balance of a mother and a father. America has lost its balance in this regard. Yet, some people haven't gotten it. They believe that the absence of a caring relationship between a father and a child is non-essential. Social scientists continue in their attempt to verify that as long as a child had one parent, they'll turn out about as well as a child who has had both parents. If that is the case, then why are we addressing the issue of school violence?

Texas classroom teachers don't need to be convinced about the rise in disruptive and violent behavior in schools. In 1967, 46% of secondary teachers reported that disruptions often interfered with teaching and learning. The percentage of teachers who said students disrupt classrooms has increased from 48% in 1984 to 65% in 1997. Fifty-six (56%) of students expelled for bringing firearms were high school students, 34% were middle school students. To fine-tune our understanding of the issues, let's be more specific about which students are involved in disruptive behavior.

While female students are increasingly involved in gang-related activities and acts of violence, the majority of classroom disruption involves males. To be more specific, we are describing adolescent and teenage boys who are disconnected from an active relationship with their father.

The evidence indicates those male students without involved fathers:

- Represent 75% of all adolescents and teenagers seen by the Justices of the Peace
- Are more than twice as likely to fail course work and repeat a grade
- Are more than six to eleven times more likely to be suspended for violent behavior
- Represent three of four deaths by suicide
- Are anxious, hostile, and more likely to be rejected by peers.
- Represent 80% of males treated in psychiatric hospitals.

There is an avalanche of data, which clearly links the absence of active fathers to the students most often involved in drug abuse, gang-related activities and violent behavior in schools. And yet, the consequences of nearly four decades of father absence have gone beyond the obvious. We have come to a position in our country in which mothers and children are viewed as the core of American families. The roles played by the fathers have been effectively dropped from our collective consciousness and from the analysis of problems and planning for interventions. In 1995, President Clinton – pointing to the neglect of research focused on fathers – directed all executive departments to include father in their programs, policies and research.

His directive did not catch on.

As an example, the guidelines for proposal seeking funding as part of the Save Schools/Healthy Students Initiative describe six elements of comprehensive planning. While program aimed at targeting high-risk mothers are encouraged, the linkage between involved, active fathers and students who behave themselves and do well is ignored. This, in spite of the USDOE (October 1997) findings, which reported that father involvement is a powerful predictor of academic success by students k-12<sup>th</sup> grades.

As the role of fathers has declined, so has the status of boys in our society. In a recent three part televised series in Austin, entitled, "From Boys to Men," adolescent boys were portrayed as obsessed with proving their "toughness," as homophobic, as a potential threat to female family members and often not suited for typical classroom situations. The reporter failed to include any reference to the fact that the boys described fit exactly the description of fatherless males, nor did the program contrast boys raised in single parent homes with those living with both parents. The program concluded by suggesting that perhaps the best setting for boys were military schools.

The fact is, if we are discussing school violence we are talking, in the majority of instances, about boys. And given the changes in the structure of American families we are talking about boys denied the benefit of fathers who love and care about them.

Certainly not every child who does not have a father will become violent and destructive. However, of those children who become violent and disruptive, most do not have a positive father connection.

Adolescent and teenage boys and girls yearn for the affection and approval of adult men. They intuitively understand that they need fathers as role models to provide a vision of themselves in the future. Fathers help prepare young men for life in the real world. Without fathers, boys become hopeless, desperate and angry.

If we examine when serious problems begin to crop up, we notice a surge of misbehavior in middle schools and high schools. The process of secondary education is much like a rehearsal for real life. That is one stage in a child's life where dads can step in and play a major role. But in America dads' roles have been discounted. Public schools are predominately matriarchal. Female teachers often don't know what to do with male students. Classroom teachers refer six time more male students for ADHD evaluation than females. Masculine students need same sex role models. Those without fathers have no where to turn, except to each other for a sense of belonging. In many instances, gangs offer the closest thing to male acceptance and guidance.

America may have changed, but the need of our children for a mother to protect them and a father to prepare them has not changed. Even if some people don't get it, the answers are right under our noses. When dads are involved in schools, achievement goes up and disruptive behavior goes down. The belief that fathers are uninterested in their children's education is unfounded. In the fall of 1998 the Center for Successful Fathering launched the Texas Fatherhood Initiative in eight of the TEA's twenty educational regions. Working within a modest budget we trained over 150 parent educators who helped us pull in over 2,600 fathers and over 2,700 children into public school in small towns, poor urban areas, along the Rio Grande border and here in San Antonio. In the last twelve months, our Fatherhood Initiative involved over 8,000 contacts.

At a middle school in Joshua, Texas (near Fort Worth), students assigned Saturday "D" hall were give credit by bringing their fathers to a Dad's Academy aimed at driving home the message that Dads "make a difference." And it did!

In other states such as California and New York, dads' programs in schools are endorsed by law enforcement authorities. Aimed a providing safe neighborhood and school campus environments, those programs verify that the presence of grown men, unarmed and friendly, stabilize and defuse potential violence. My co-worker, Alphonso Rincón, recalls that when law enforcement officials are present, but play low profile roles, a safe context can be provided for rival gangs to resolve disputes.

We at the CSF call upon the Attorney General, the Juvenile Justice System, the TEA and the Texas Department of Health and others on the School Violence and Prevention Task Force to support father involvement as a priority intervention on creating safe public schools.

Next spring, Attorney General Cornyn will join the CSF in co-sponsoring four regional Fatherhood Academies across Texas. I invite the members of this Task Force to work with the CSF to expand the range and scope of these Academies to include the issues of school safety as part of an agenda that promotes father involvement.