

# The Center for Successful Fathering

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## ***The Impact of Absent Fathers***

***By. Dr. Ron Klinger***

The stability and well being of any society is inseparable from its ability to raise children who become civilized, productive citizens. Unlike other animal species, humans require a long period of development in an environment that is secure, protective and which provides the preparation necessary to prevail in a challenging world. The family is the institution charged with the rearing of children and parents are the adults responsible. Because of the demand that children be protected and prepared for adulthood and because of the challenges of making a living, parenting requires a long term commitment that is often stressful and difficult to balance and manage, even by parents.

Sadly, too many families in America are in crisis or have been broken. Parents in the 1990's are spending 40% less time with their children than parents a generation ago. (Robinson, 1989) In 1965 parents averaged about 30 hours a week with their children; by 1985 parents were spending an average of only 17 hours a week with their children. (Mattox, 1991)

But if children suffer from a "time deficit" linked to both parents working outside the home, problems only intensify and multiply when once two-parent households becomes one-parent households due to divorce. That is precisely what has been happening in our country, especially since the 1960s. About that time no-fault divorce took effect and is no doubt a major contributing factor to the break-up of marriages.

Most experts agree the chance of a first marriage ending in divorce is 50 percent. The chances of second marriages ending in divorce are from 60-70 percent.

- In 1990, Texas had 680,092 divorced persons;
- Travis County had 20,119 divorced men and 29,143 divorced women

In 1990, about three of five divorcing adults had at least one child. (Bumpass, 1990) The cumulative effect is staggering: in 1960 463,000 children were involved in divorce, by 1980 there were 1,174,000 children involved in divorce. In sum, before 1960, about 80 percent of the children in this country lived at home with both of their biological parents' by the year 20-00, only 25 percent children will be living with both their biological parents.

An overlooked dimension of the unraveling of the family in this country has been the diminished role of fathers. With each passing decade, millions of fathers have disconnected from their children. Today, fathers have become invisible parents, except as wage earners. When there is a divorce in which custody of the children is determined, 90 percent remain with the mother. Within 18-24 months after a divorce, most fathers become less like fathers and more like "visiting uncles." Researcher William Aquilino found that divorced fathers' weekly contact with their children was 44 percent compared to 78 percent for still married fathers. (1994) Furstenberg found in a nationally representative study of children 11-16 years of age who lived in mother-headed household that almost half had not seen their father in "the last twelve months." (1988) Not only have fathers been perceived as invisible but they begin to see themselves as without relevant roles involving their children.

The growing invisibility of fathers has not been lost on the American people. According to a 1992 Gallup poll, over 50 percent of all adults agreed that "fathers today spend less time with their children than their fathers did with them." Four years later, a Gallup Poll found that 79.1 percent of Americans feel "the most significant family or social problem facing America is the physical absence of the father from the home."

**Crime** – The consequences of absent fathers cuts across our society. In fact, fatherlessness is the most powerful predictor of a host of social problems. The chances that a young male will get involved in criminal behavior triples if he is raised without a father. (Hill & O'Neill, 1993) Seventy percent of youth in state reform institution grew up in single- or no-parent situations. Two researchers reanalyzed data of delinquency in the 1950s involving 500 delinquents and concluded that the absence of fathers was more the cause of the delinquency than poverty. (Sampson & Laub, 1994) In addition, 72 percent of murderers and 60 percent of rapists grew up without fathers.

**Education** – Many believe that there is a direct relationship between success in school and productive citizens. The absence of fathers reduces the ability of children to succeed in school. Fatherless children are twice as likely to drop out of school. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1993) Children living with a divorced or a never married mother are more likely to repeat a grade. (Dawson, 1991) Children of divorced parents, especially boys, tend to score lower on reading and math tests. (One Parent Families..., 1980) In contrast, a 1997 study by the U.S. Department of Education found that when fathers are involved, ...”there children are more likely to get mostly A’s in school.”

**Teen Parents** – A predictable consequence of children raised in a single-parent household is that they become unwed parents as teens. Unlike their parents who had contact with a father when growing up, unwed, many teen parents never know what it is like to have a father. For the girls, as well as the boys, the absence of a father creates an emotional void: “father hunger.” Fatherless boys and girls yearn for affection and often seek approval through sexual interaction. In 1960 there were 224,300 births to unmarried mothers; in 1992 there were 1,225,000 births to unwed mothers. In 1991, nearly 70 percent of births to teenage girls were fathered by men 20 years of age or older. (National Center for Health Statistics, 1993)

Other consequences of fatherlessness included middle school boys with a reduced sense of masculinity. As a whole, fatherless children experience higher incidence of depression and admittance into psychiatric hospitals, higher aggression in school and at home, reduced ability to form positive peer relationships, much greater risk of suicide, higher drug and alcohol abuse, and diminished health.

It is clear that the absence of fathers is a problem whose consequences permeate our social fabric. If we can reconnect fathers – whether custodial/married, non-custodial, incarcerated, or a teen – to their children, we can begin to turn the tide in favor of our children and families.