

RESOURCE FOR ORGANISED DIALOGUES

Modern Day Dads

The modern day father comes in various forms. Today's father is no longer always the traditional married breadwinner and disciplinarian in the family. He can be single or married; externally employed or stay-at home; gay or straight; an adoptive or step-parent; and a more than capable caregiver to children facing physical or psychological challenges. Psychological research across families from all ethnic backgrounds suggests that fathers' affection and increased family involvement help promote children's social and emotional development.

Changes in the role Economic Trends

Two to three centuries ago, fathers' roles were primarily to serve as breadwinners and the conveyers of moral values and religious education to their children. However, with the advent of industrialization and urbanization and as factories emerged as major sources of employment, fathers became distanced from the household and their families. Growing rates of abandonment and illegitimacy led to the development of welfare programs to assist widowed or unmarried women in supporting their children.

In more recent decades, the changing economic role of women has greatly impacted the role of fathers. Between 1948 and 2001, the percentage of working age women employed or looking for work nearly doubled—from less than 33 percent to more than 60 percent. Their increase in financial power made paternal financial support less necessary for some families. In tandem with the growing autonomy of women, related trends such as declining fertility, increasing rates of divorce and remarriage, and childbirth outside of marriage have resulted in a transition from traditional to multiple undefined roles for many fathers. Today's fathers have started to take on roles vastly different from fathers of previous generations.

Changes in Caregiving Roles

Historically, research on child development has focused more on the sensitivity of mothers to fulfilling their children's needs. However, in the last 20 to 30 years, research has increasingly focused on fathers.

This is due to the growing role modern day fathers play in caregiving. A study conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) found that fathers tended to be more involved in caregiving when:

they worked fewer hours than other fathers; they had positive psychological adjustment characteristics (e.g., high self-esteem, lower

levels of depression and hostility, and coping well with the major tasks of adulthood); mothers worked more hours than other mothers; mothers reported greater marital intimacy; and when children were boys.

Other research on the role of fathers suggests that the influence of father love on children's development is as great as the influence of a mother's love. Fatherly love helps children develop a sense of their place in the world, which helps their social, emotional and cognitive development and functioning. Moreover, children who receive more love from their fathers are less likely to struggle with behavioural or substance abuse problems.

Non-residential fathers

Research on the impact of absent and non-residential fathers on the lives of children illuminates how crucial their role is. Theoretical models of fatherhood have outlined four major tasks involved in “responsible fatherhood”:

- providing financial support
- providing care
- providing emotional support
- establishing legal paternity

As of 2006, 38 percent of all births were to unmarried women — a more than six-fold increase since 1960. Non-marital birth rates are highest for Hispanic women followed by African-American women. Rates for non-Hispanic white and Asian or Pacific Islander women are much lower. However, crude stereotypes about minority fathers in particular overlook the complex economic, psychological, cultural and relational issues that affect their fathering behaviours. There are cultural variations in fathers' caregiving practices that counter several negative stereotypes.

Low-income, minority and non-residential fathers who have jobs and education are more likely to be involved with their children. Research has found that African-American men are more likely to physically care for, feed and prepare meals for their infants than either white or Hispanic fathers. Emerging research on cultural influences on parenting beliefs in the African-American community show family and community pressure on unmarried non-residential fathers to provide financial and child-care support at marginally higher rates than their white and Hispanic counterparts. Some ethnographic data has emerged that significant amounts of paternal financial support (both cash and in-kind aid) may go unreported in formal systems. Many unemployed fathers may have access to their children restricted by the child's mother/ family members or may even remove themselves due to their own shame resulting from inability to provide financial support. Even incarcerated fathers can play a role in the rearing of their children by regularly communicating with and making parenting decisions with their spouses and other family members. Even in cases where biological fathers are completely absent, maternal partners, stepfathers, grandparents or other relatives may serve as father figures.

The status of the father's relationship with his child's mother serves an important influence on father involvement. Non-residential fathers are at high risk for becoming disconnected from their children over time. Lacking a minimally close relationship, as is the case when couples become acquaintances, is likely to result in lower levels of paternal engagement of children.

Divorced and Step Fathers

In cases of divorce, it is often difficult if not impossible for fathers to maintain the same types of parenting roles with their biological children. Indeed, children of divorce — and later, remarriage — are twice as likely to academically, behaviourally and socially struggle as children of first-marriage families. Most divorced fathers do not receive full custody of their children. As a result, maintaining their roles as parents can be difficult due to the reduction in time spent with their children. Fortunately, visitation of fathers post-divorce has increased over the past two decades. However, it is not the frequency of contact between father and child, but rather the quality of the visits that contributes to the child's well-being. Research has found that the key factors that contribute to healthy adjustment for children post-divorce include:

appropriate parenting (i.e., providing emotional support, monitoring children's activities, disciplining authoritatively and maintaining age appropriate expectations), enough access to the non-residential parent, suitable custody arrangements, (joint legal custody often results in shared decision making, more father-child visits, regular child support payments and more satisfied and better adjusted children) low parental conflict, and parents who are psychologically healthy.

It is estimated that one in three Americans is part of a step-family. Step-fathers can encounter many difficulties in their new parenting roles. They must strike a balance between maintaining healthy relationships with their ex-spouses in order to benefit their biological children without alienating their new partners. In addition, it may take years before they are accepted as “real” parents by their step-children. Research has found that the type of step-family with best outcomes for children consists of parents who form a solid, committed partnership so they can not only nurture their marriage, but also effectively raise their children. These parents don't follow unrealistic expectations of what the family should be like.

Gay Fathers

As more and more gay men are able to live their lives openly and to establish long-term, supportive and loving relationships, like heterosexual couples, they are beginning to start families. With the growing numbers of gay fathers in our society, research suggests that they are likely to divide the work involved in child care relatively evenly and that they are happy with their couple relationships. In fact, research findings suggest that gay parents are as likely as heterosexual parents to provide supportive home environments for children. Research has found no evidence to support the following concerns with regard to foster care and adoption by gay fathers:

the belief that gay men are mentally ill, and the belief that gay men's relationships with sexual partners leave little time for ongoing parent-child interactions

Extensive research over the last three decades shows that homosexuality is not a mental disorder; there is no reliable evidence that it impairs psychological functioning, although the discrimination and prejudice gay men face can often cause acute distress. Likewise, beliefs that gay men are not fit parents have no empirical foundation.

Stay at home fathers

While still a relatively small proportion of all fathers (an estimated 159,000 out of the nation's 64 million), the emergence of the "stay-at-home" father demonstrates a new type of patriarch who is primarily charged with caregiving in the context of his family. In fact, the number of stay-at-home dads is growing at a rapid pace, having increased by 50 percent between 2003 and 2006. For many fathers, the decision to stay home with their children stems from:

their spouse's strong earning potential; their own desire to serve as the primary caregiver; and a shared reluctance along with their spouse to allow someone else to raise their children.

Stay-at-home fathers are routinely confronted with stigma due to their flouting of the social norms surrounding masculine behaviour. Most of these fathers do not feel bound to these norms and are comfortable being affectionate and nurturing with their children, characteristics which are traditionally thought of as feminine. In addition, despite their increasing numbers their relative rarity can isolate them from other full-time parents. Some fathers report being shunned from playgroups and eyed suspiciously at the playground by stay-at-home mothers.

In 1960, only 10% of children were raised without a father in the home.

Today, 40% are.

There are many reasons behind this sobering statistic. The clichéd case of a man knocking up a woman, and then leaving town never to return certainly still occurs.

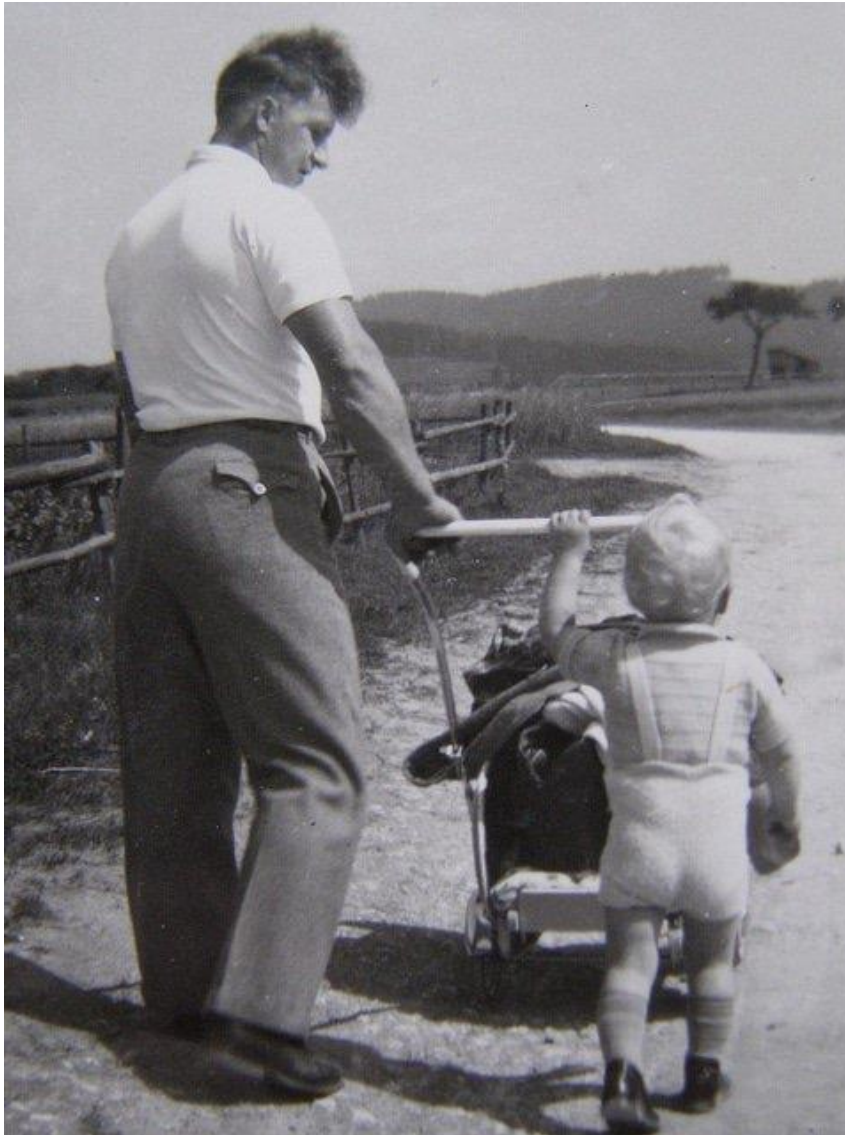
But sometimes a man's ex-wife petitions for primary custody of their kids, and sympathetic family courts unjustly grant this request about 80% of the time.

And there is an increasing number of women — who for various reasons cannot or do not want to raise their children with a boyfriend or husband — [who intentionally choose to become single mothers](#).

It seems like more and more folks feel that dads are optional and that single moms can do just fine raising children on their own. Just [over half of births among Millennials](#) are to unwed mothers, significantly more than past generations, including Gen X. And only about half of Millennials believe a child needs a home with both a father and a mother present to grow up happily.

Yet despite the trend in popular culture towards greater acceptance of single motherhood, study after study empirically demonstrates that dads play an extremely important role in a child's well-being and success. Below we list a few studies that show exactly how much fathers influence their children's lives.

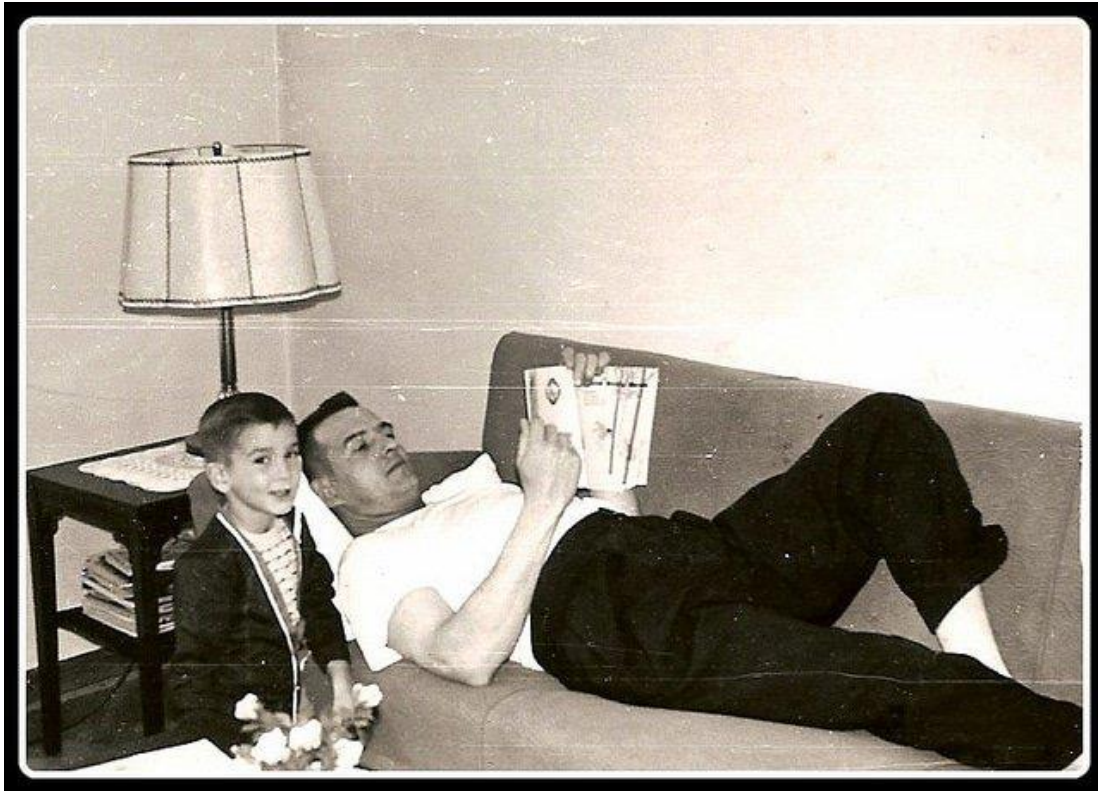
Children With Fathers Are Less Likely to Live in Poverty



Statistics suggest that children in father-absent homes are more likely to be poor. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 44% of children in mother-only families were living in poverty, compared to only 12% of children living in a household headed by a married couple.

The U.S. Department of Health has reported similar statistics that connect absent fathers with poverty. In a 2012 report, they found that children living in female-headed households with no spouse present had a poverty rate of 47.6%, over 4 times the rate of married-couple families.

Children With Fathers Do Better in School



[Image Source](#)

[A 2001 study by the Department of Education](#) showed that students whose fathers were highly involved at school were 43% more likely to receive A's. This was true for fathers in biological parent families, for stepfathers, and for fathers heading single-parent families.

On the flip side, students living in father-absent homes were twice as likely to repeat a grade as students with a father in the home.

A concern that many educators have about boys is that they don't enjoy reading. But dads can help here too. [One study](#) reports that when fathers read recreationally, their sons read more and scored higher than did boys whose fathers did little or no recreational reading.

Children Without Fathers Are More Likely to Do Jail Time

Youths in father-absent households have significantly higher odds of incarceration than those in mother/father families. This was even true after controlling for different income levels. Young people who *never* had a father in the household experienced the highest odds of doing jail time.

The Department of Justice surveyed 7,000 inmates in 2002 and found that [39% of them lived in a mother-only household before being locked-up](#). [In a similar study](#) that surveyed nearly 14,000 female inmates, more than half grew up in a single-mother household.

Children With Fathers Are Less Likely to Abuse Drugs and Alcohol



[A report in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*](#) showed that even after controlling for community context, there is significantly more drug use among children who live in father-absent homes.

[In another survey of 228 boys](#), those from single-mother homes reported higher rates of drinking and smoking as well as higher scores on delinquency and aggression tests when compared to boys from father/mother households.

Children Without Fathers Are More Likely to Be Sexually Active as Teenagers

[A recent study](#) showed that involved dads have twice the influence as moms on reducing teen sex.

[Another study](#) that pooled teenagers from the U.S. and New Zealand found that children without fathers were twice as likely to be involved in early sexual activity and seven times more likely to get pregnant as adolescents.

Children Without Fathers Are More Likely to Be Obese



Children in father-absent homes have a higher risk of becoming obese and suffer all the health risks that come with excess weight.

But even if dad is around, it doesn't necessarily mean his kids will be fit. In fact, several studies report that fathers have the biggest impact on the overall fitness and weight of their children.

[In one](#), it was found that the father's, not the mother's, total and percentage body fat was the best predictor of whether or not the couple's daughters gained weight as they got older.

[Another study](#) showed fathers' (again, not the mothers') body mass index is directly related to a child's activity level.

Children With Fathers Get More Roughhousing (And Roughhousing Makes Kids Awesome)

Cross-cultural studies have found that the one thing fathers across the world have in common is that they roughhouse with their kids more than moms. And roughhousing, according to science, makes kids awesome. [As we highlighted in a previous post](#), roughhousing makes kids resilient, smart, moral, and socially adept.

Children With Fathers Are More Likely to Have a Larger Vocabulary



[Image Source](#)

When it comes to a child's verbal development, the popular belief is that the mother plays the most important role because, well, women are usually with their children more and women are supposed to be more verbal than men.

As Paul Raeburn highlights in his book [Do Fathers Matter?](#), recent research suggests that dads actually play just as an important, if not more important, role in the verbal fluency of their children. Professor Lynne Vernon-Feagans and her team conducted a study to measure parental influence on early childhood verbal development. The surprising result from this study was that fathers, not mothers, had much more of an influence on a child's verbal adeptness.

Vernon-Feagans hypothesizes the reason dads have more of an influence on a child's verbal development is that because fathers frequently don't spend as much time with children, they're not as attuned to their current verbal development as mothers.

Consequently, while mothers will use words that the child is familiar with, fathers will use unfamiliar words, thus helping the child broaden their vocabulary and learn new concepts.

Children With Fathers Are More Likely to Be Encouraged to Take Healthy Risks



While mothers tend to focus on their child's safety and well-being, dads are more likely to encourage risk and independent thinking in their children which will benefit them well into adulthood. As family and marriage researcher [Professor Brad Wilcox has noted](#), researchers have found that dads are more likely than moms to encourage their kids to talk to strangers, take on challenges, and to think for themselves.

Children With Fathers Gain Many Additional Benefits to Health and Happiness



[The Grant Study, the longest longitudinal study ever done on the lives of men](#), found that a man's father influenced his life in many ways exclusive to his relationship with his mother. Loving fathers imparted to their sons:

- enhanced capacity to play
- more enjoyment of vacations
- greater likelihood of being able to use humor as a healthy coping mechanism
- better adjustment to, and contentment with, life after retirement
- less anxiety and fewer physical and mental symptoms under stress in young adulthood

In the negative column, it “was not the men with poor mothering but the ones with poor fathering who were significantly more likely to have poor marriages over their lifetimes.” Men who lacked a positive relationship with their fathers were also “much more likely to call themselves pessimists and to report having trouble letting others get close.”

If there was ever any doubt, fathers matter, *a lot*. When all is said and done, a man's relationship with his father very significantly predicted his overall life satisfaction at age 75 — “a variable not even suggestively associated with the maternal relationship.”

Conclusion



I know that sometimes parenting can be discouraging. You might think that you really don't have much of an influence on your kids. I hope these studies and reports have shown you otherwise. Your role as a dad is immensely important. So focus on being the best dad you can be. It's not enough to just be there. Read to your kids. Get involved at their school. Roughhouse. Encourage them to take risks. Stay fit. These small things have a huge return on investment for the well-being of your children.

If you fathered a kid, but haven't had much of a role in his or her life for whatever reason, I challenge you to step up and embrace your role as a dad to the greatest extent you can.

Yeah, it's going to be hard, and yeah, it's not always going to be fun, but it's your responsibility. And being a man means doing your duty.

If you're a single mom, not by choice, these studies may seem discouraging. But rather than being so, let them be an encouragement to make sure your children are influenced by male mentors — be they uncles, brothers, coaches, Boy Scout leaders, and the like.

And if you're a mom going through a divorce, know that while it's natural to want your kids as much as possible, if your husband is a good guy (through an objective lens, not through the lens of the acrimony created by your split), it's ultimately in your children's best interest to share custody equally.

Dads everywhere have the opportunity to leave a big impact on the world. Don't underestimate your influence on the lives of your children.

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In summary, the modern day father can contribute to his children's health and well-being by maintaining a healthy relationship with the other parent even in cases of divorce; providing emotional and financial support, appropriate monitoring and discipline; and most importantly by remaining a permanent and loving presence in their lives.