

Findings



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Too Many Fatherless Children

Can Mentoring Make a Difference?

By Alysse Michelle Elhage



In America today, over 22 million children are being raised in fatherless households.¹ That means four out of every ten children go to bed at night in homes where their father does not

live.² In North Carolina, mother-only families total 27.2 percent.³

June is the month when we celebrate fathers. We grant them a special day each year, yet for the most part fail to recognize their critical importance in the lives of children. Fatherless households have almost become the norm in a society where fathers are viewed by many simply as child-support providers and not as the character developers of future generations that they truly are. Their absence from the home has an adverse impact on children and society as a whole.

A Few Fatherless Facts

Dr. Wade Horn, president of the National Fatherhood Initiative, has called fatherlessness “our most urgent social problem.”⁴ A few facts about fatherless kids support this statement.

- About 75 percent of children raised in father-absent homes will experience poverty before they reach age 11, compared to only 20 percent of kids in two-parent families.⁵
- Children from broken homes are twice as likely to drop out of high school, compared to children from intact homes.⁶
- Girls raised in mother-only homes are 2.5 times more likely to become teen mothers.⁷
- Fatherless kids are 1.4 times more likely to be idle (out of school and out of work).⁸
- Children in father-absent homes are more likely to be treated for emotional or

behavioral problems, commit suicide as adolescents and be victims of child abuse or neglect.⁹

- Sixty percent of rapists, 72 percent of adolescent murderers and 70 percent of long-term prison inmates are men who grew up in fatherless households.¹⁰

Beyond the Statistics

While statistics are powerful, numbers alone can never tell the whole story. It is often so easy to forget the real lives beyond the figures. “Van” is one of the 22 million fatherless children in this country.¹¹ He was ten-years-old when his father abandoned the family for a blonde waitress he met in a bar, leaving “Van,” his two younger sisters and

from his mother and the police and living on the streets with other runaways. His father, who had spent little time with him after the divorce, told his mother to “just let him go.”

Poor School Performance

One of the most devastating impacts of fatherlessness is evident in a child’s performance in school. According to a 1988 study conducted by Drs. Sheila Krein and Andrea H. Beller, “the absence of a father has a significant negative effect on the educational attainment of boys.”¹²

“Van” was no exception. He failed the ninth grade twice, largely because he never attended a full day’s worth of classes the entire year. He has never gone back.

Drug Use

Poor school performance is not the only negative impact of father-absence. According to Nicholas Davidson, “fathers play a particularly important role in preventing drug use.”¹³ In fact, according to a recent UCLA study, 35 percent of mother-only homes have children who abuse drugs frequently.¹⁴

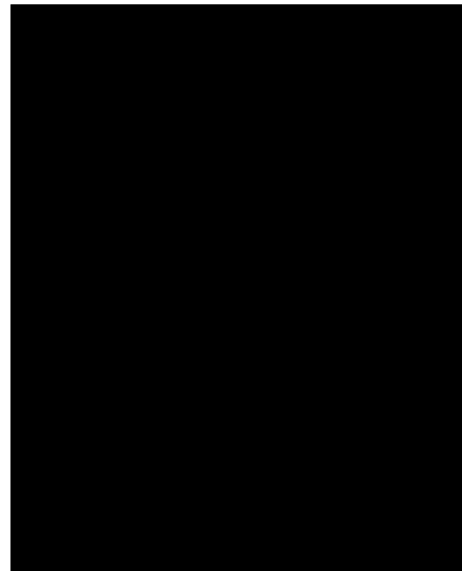
“Van” began smoking pot with his friends during junior high. This soon escalated into the abuse of harder, more dangerous drugs like Cocaine. He spent months in and out of teen drug/detox rehabilitation centers.

Gangs/Criminal Activity

Perhaps one of the most dangerous influences for fatherless kids, specifically boys, comes from the threat of gang involvement. In fact, most gang members come from fatherless households.¹⁵

When “Van” was fifteen, he ran away from home and joined a group of runaways who were living on the streets, doing drugs and engaging in street wars with other gangs.

Gene Bilbray, a drug counselor who works with teens in Jacksonville, Florida,



his mother to take care of themselves.

The years following the divorce were hardest on “Van.” He seemed beyond his mother’s ability to reach him. What started out small, like misbehaving in class and letting his grades drop, turned into drug use and gang involvement. At one point, he threatened suicide. He ended up running

says that gang affiliation is common. “These kids have their needs met by the gang—the gang family provides those relationships that aren’t being met at home,” he says.¹⁶

The tendency for kids without fathers (or father-figures) is to reach out anywhere possible for the male companionship and bond they crave. Whatever form that companionship comes in, whether positive or negative, it provides these children with the male interaction they lack at home.

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, vice president of the Institute for American Values, states: “The nations mayors, as well as police officers, social workers, probation officers and court officials, consistently point to family break up as the most important source of rising rates of crime.”¹⁷

Studies have shown that criminal activity, particularly in males, can be traced back to a broken family life. According to a 1990 study by L. Edward Wells and Joseph Rankin, “the tendency for delinquency in broken homes is 10 to 15 percent higher than in intact homes.”¹⁸ Seventy percent of criminals in state reform institutions come from homes where there was no father present.¹⁹

“Van’s” involvement in a teenage gang led him into criminal activity. He was involved in stealing his mother’s car, has been arrested for robbing from a gas station, and was involved in the assault of a rival teenage gang member.

According to Dr. Wade Horn of the National Fatherhood Initiative, none of this should come as a surprise. “What should a society expect when father-absence becomes the norm?” he asks. “Increasing violence and incivility, and that’s precisely what we are seeing.”²⁰

No longer can our society afford to ignore the importance of fathers. Studies have shown that fathers play an integral role in the development of children into healthy and contributing adults. The absence of the guidance and support of a large number of fathers from the home is detrimental, not only for the children involved but for society as a whole.

What Fathers Provide

Fathers play a critical role in the socialization of children, according to Dr. Horn. He defines this as the “process whereby an individual acquires the behaviors, attitudes, values and customs regarded

as desirable and appropriate by society.”²¹ “The socialization of children simply does not get done as well when fathers are absent from the home,” he says.²²

Fathers provide much more than an extra paycheck at the end of every month. They provide children with an example of manhood and serve as authority figures and approval providers. Without fathers to model these things, children look to their peers to fill the gap.

There is more to being a man than simply shaving or tossing a baseball. By a father’s actions, children learn how a husband should treat his wife (and women in general) and how to be responsible in life.

A father’s approval is very important to both little boys and girls. When a boy hits a homerun, the first face he searches for in the stands is his father’s. And when a little girl puts on a new dress, it is her daddy’s approving smile she longs to see. The absence of this approval and acceptance from an older, wiser male can be devastating for both boys and girls. Make no mistake, they will look for this approval somewhere, and too often they find it through their peers.

Finally, a father serves as an authority figure in the home. His job is to back up the mother and help her enforce rules. When there is no father present, things can get

quickly out of hand for a single mom. Children can either totally disregard her demands or become violent when she tries to enforce them.

“Committed fathers perform

critical functions in the socialization of their children, such as learning not to strike others to get what they want, listening and obeying the instructions of legitimate authority figures, and delaying impulse gratification,” says Don Eberly, founder of the National Fatherhood Initiative.²³

What a father provides for his children is irreplaceable. He gives his children a model of manhood, approval and acceptance and enforces authority in the home. None of this can be replaced by a child support check or an occasional weekend visit.

How Do We Meet the Need?

There is no question that fathers are vitally important in the lives of children, and that their absence in such large numbers is cause for alarm. Senator Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) writes: “Increasingly invisible

men are creating a visible void, not only in their families but in their communities as well.”²⁴

One way to address the growing problem of fatherlessness is to focus on strengthening marriage and to educate men and women about the negative impact father-absence can have on children. Organizations like the National Fatherhood Initiative, the Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and the Institute for American Values represent just a few of the national organizations who recognize the importance of fathers and are focused on encouraging responsible fatherhood in families across this nation. Through radio and television campaigns, research groups and commissions, these organizations are trying to bring respect back to the concept of fatherhood.

But what about the 22 million children who are growing up right now without fathers? Something must be done to provide these children with the male role models they need. Wishing their fathers were there to meet these needs will not change the fact that they are absent. The answer is not to attempt the impossible task of forcing these delinquent dads to spend more time with their kids. Short of a change of heart and a transformation in their own lives, this will not happen overnight. Before these kids turn to their peers, men of character need to step in and be examples. According to Senator Dan Coats (R-Indiana), “In the absence of fathers, children need more than funding and programs, they need mentors and examples.”²⁵

While it is true that no one can ever come close to filling the hole that only a father is meant to fill, there is something that can be done right now to stop the endless cycle of failure in school, drug abuse, gang involvement, poverty and criminal activity these kids are headed for. These children are reaching out for role models—for men to show them what it means to be a man, to show them right from wrong and to impose some aspect of authority in their lives.

Model Program

This is not a new concept. Big Brothers, Big Sisters of America (BBBS), a national organization funded by the United Way, has been around since 1904 providing mentoring relationships for both girls and boys. Their mentoring programs have had successful results. For example, a national study conducted in 1995 by Public/Private Ventures found that 46 percent of children involved in the mentoring programs were less likely to use drugs, 27 percent were less likely to start drinking, and 53 percent were

“In the absence of fathers, children need more than funding and programs, they need mentors and examples.”

Senator Dan Coats

less likely to skip school.²⁶ Other results of the study found that these children were less likely to act out violently, more confident in their performance in school and better able to get along with their families.²⁷

While this is good news, organizations like Big Brothers, Big Sisters can never meet this growing need alone. The Winston-Salem chapter of BBBS of North Carolina, for example, has close to 100 children on their waiting list for mentors.²⁸ According to Rakelle Sutton, program director for this chapter, 85 of these children on the waiting list are little boys who can expect a waiting period of up to two years.²⁹ There are just not enough men willing to get involved.

A Solution

It is time for churches and other private organizations to step in and help meet this need. The government may be able to force delinquent dads to send child support checks, but it can't force them to provide what their children need and want the most. Until more dads are willing or able to step up to their responsibilities, communities need to take the initiative. This will not only benefit the broken families but all of society.

Society is reaping the consequences of what happens when too many fathers are absent from the home and the men who could make a difference choose to do nothing about the children who are left behind.

"Van," one of those children who was left behind, is 19-years-old today. He never finished high school, has been in and out of juvenile jail and de-tox centers for the past four years, and has had a string of jobs since leaving home. He lives in a tiny apartment with a group of drop-outs who spend their time partying or just "hanging out." He tells his mother that he wants to change his life but just doesn't know how. When "Van" does see his father, he sees a 44-year-old, out-of-work, pot-smoking man sprawled on the couch watching television, and turns away even more empty and confused.

It is certainly not possible to change "Van's" past or erase the mistakes he has made. Neither should he be excused for his crimes merely because he comes from fatherless home. But there is much to learn

from "Van's" story about the need for strong male role models in the lives of children and what can happen when no one steps in to meet that need.

A Success Story

What can happen when a child is mentored? The course of a life can change drastically. Again, looking beyond mere statistics, Randy Nabors is an example of the impact a mentor can have on a fatherless child.³⁰ Raised in the inner city by his single mother, Randy had no contact with his father from a very early age. He became involved with a neighborhood gang in an attempt to reach out for

acceptance.

But at the age of nine, his mother joined a local church, and his life changed dramatically when the pastor took an interest in him. "My pastor became my mentor—he became the man that guided me," he says.

Randy Nabors' life took a positive turn as a result. He not only got out of the gang and finished high school but went on to get his college degree. Today, he is the senior pastor of New City Fellowship in Chattanooga, Tennessee and has two boys of his

own. Without the man who took the time to mentor him as a little boy, Pastor Nabors' life might have turned out much differently.

As this story shows, any one can be a mentor—a teacher, a coach, a pastor. Mentoring does not always have to take place through a structured program in order to achieve successful results. Mentoring is about men taking the time to reach out to broken children who desperately need strong role models.

Filling the Gap

It is time for society and, more importantly, faith-based communities to reach out to the millions of fatherless children in this country by encouraging men to be mentors. For years, the church has focused most of its attention on keeping families together. A noble cause indeed, but what about the millions of families who are not together and the children who are suffering because of it? What these families lack is having a detrimental impact on future generations. Fatherless children need men who will take the time to show them what it means to be a man of character, who will affirm them, and who will give them hope for the future.

Mentoring does call for a sacrifice of time and self. But it is a sacrifice that can make a world of a difference in the lives of fatherless children and in society.

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Suggestions for Church Mentoring Programs

- Educate members about this issue and encourage their involvement. Focus on getting the men to volunteer and the women to support them.
- Gear the program to fatherless children within the church first, but with a goal to reach outside the church into the community.
- Choose children on basis of need - meaning those who have little or no contact with their fathers or other male family members. Early intervention is important. The most successful mentoring relationships begin when the child is four or five.
- Only one child per mentor and one mentor per child. Focus on building one-on-one relationships. Consistency is essential when dealing with kids from broken homes.
- Mentoring relationships should last at least one year and longer if possible.
- Mentors should commit to spend as much time as possible with the children. This can range from once a month to once every few months.
- Single moms should have limited involvement. It is important to remember that these relationships are for the children alone. Moms should be involved in the choice of the mentor and should be kept informed throughout the relationship, but this should be carried out through the pastor or program director.
- There must be an extensive screening process for each mentor, including background checks, character references, and his willingness to be trained on the do's and don'ts of mentoring.

Endnotes

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26. Big Brothers, Big Sisters, Ibid.
27. Telephone interview with Rakelle Sutton, program director, Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, June 2, 1999.
28. Sutton, Ibid.
29. Personal Interview with Pastor Randy Nabors, March 1997.
30. Nabors, Ibid.

Additional Resources

Big Brothers, Big Sisters of America

230 North 13th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19107
Phone: 215-567-7000
Web: www.bbbsa.org

Big Brothers, Big Sisters of Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Rakelle Sutton, Program Director
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