
OVERVIEW

Does absence make the girl grow stronger? Is she more able to resist the pressures of premature sexual activity or does her lack of a male figure in the home cause her to excessively seek male affection elsewhere? Is she better able to cope with the absence if her father leaves when she is four or when she is fourteen? These questions—and others—are examined in this article.

In 1987, 42.7% of all black children under the age of eighteen were living in homes headed by females (United States Bureau of the Census, 1987). This reflects a 41% increase since 1970 (Wilson, 1987). Additionally, black teenagers are five times as likely as white teenagers to give birth (Edelman, 1987). Does a correlation exist? Sadly, two thirds of children in black father-absent homes are poor and likely to remain poor (Edelman, 1987). Although many articles addressing the black adult male reveal factors leading to his absenteeism, very few examine the effect of this phenomenon on his children. The studies conducted generally date to the 1960s. This article is one of the few current works of research available.

The study, performed on ninety black adolescent females living in public housing, compared the sexual attitudes and likely behaviors of father-present girls to the father-absent girls. They were also tested to determine their need for social approval. The findings follow:

- Father-absent girls are not found to be more sexually permissive than father-present girls in attitude or reported behavior.
- Father-absent girls show greater inconsistency between their attitudes toward sex and their likely behavior. This suggests that father absence may result in a greater degree of conflict between values and behaviors.
- Father-absent girls who "lost" their fathers before age five have a significantly higher need for social approval (from both males and females) than those who "lost" their fathers after age five. This
indicates a critical need for a stable father in the home during the early formative years.

The results of the study disproved the hypothesis of the researcher, who predicted that the father-absent girls would be much more sexually permissive. It is also unclear what role race and poverty played in the results. Marion Wright Edelman, President of the Children’s Defense Fund, stated in 1987,

I believe that poor female-headed households, male joblessness, and poverty are all parts of the same conundrum which we must act to pierce now, rather than just continue to debate whether the chicken or the egg came first. Certainly we need to understand as much as we can, and thoughtful academic research and exchange on cause and effect are needed. But we cannot afford to wait for a precise desegregation before we act to save another generation of black young.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

• Why are so many black families headed by females?
• Should the absence of the black father or female-headed households be viewed as culturally deviant or culturally variant? (In other words, is it bad or just different?)
• How does the father-absent girl relate to her male peers and male adults?
• What factors prevent black males from staying with their families?
• In the absence of a father, what roles must be assumed by other members of the family?
• Why is there greater inconsistency between values and likely behaviors in father-absent girls than father-present girls? What is the conflict?

IMPLICATIONS

• Little current research is available on this crucial issue.
• When working with youth, it is essential to understand the family dynamics in relationship to the parents in the home. While this study focuses on the black female youth, many correlations can be made to
other one-parent families. Adolescents growing up in one-parent families are definitely at risk in their emotional and moral development.

- Forgiveness and reconciliation need to happen for the youth themselves. The problems in their parents’ marriage are not their problems. They are victims and need not blame themselves.

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