

FATHERHOOD OVERVIEW

(see also parenting)

Dictionary definitions of father begin with “a male parent of a child or man who acts as a parent” and continues with many metaphorical uses of the word such as ancestor, founder, prototype, and male leader. Here we consider fatherhood in terms of the conception and care of children.

Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia’s article on “Father,” points out complexities in defining even a biological father:

- natural father - biological father who alone or with mother becomes child’s caretaker
- surprise father – man does not know a child resulted from a sexual encounter
- posthumous father – child is born after the biological father has died
- child/teenage father – youthful father while still under legal age
- non-parental father – (UK) unmarried father whose name does not appear on birth certificate but had financial responsibility
- sperm-donor father – a genetic connection where man has neither legal nor financial responsibility

Wikipedia goes on to note social-legal possibilities of fatherhood:

- step father – wife/partner has child from previous relationship
- father-in-law – father of one’s spouse
- adoptive father – child is adopted
- foster father – child is fostered
- cuckolded father – child is the product of a mother’s adulterous relationship
- social father – man takes de facto responsibility for a child (‘child of the family’ in English law)
- mother’s partner – assumption that current partner fills father’s role
- mother’s wife – under some jurisdictions (Quebec) if mother is married to another woman, latter is defined as father.

During the latter part of the twentieth century, social and academic concern was reasonably focused on women and mothers—in the U.S. and worldwide. A possible by-product of this concern and the feminist movement, was an inadvertent weakening of the position of men in society and the family. Serious studies, however, have turned to other factors during the twentieth century that made a father’s position tenuous or even precarious. Not only the welfare system and divorce laws. but economic changes, made it more difficult for men to sense their manhood and exert expected leadership roles. Nowhere was this more evident than in the inner-

city black community. There, loss of employment opportunities, racism, classism and distortions of the criminal justice system, along with all the problems of a resulting oppositional culture, robbed families and communities of its male constituency and leadership.

Rather surprisingly and perhaps dishearteningly, basic questions about fatherhood have not been resolved in the academic or political policy centers of U.S. and other societies. Questions such as:

- Are more children living today without fathers?
- Are fathers needed in a family unit?
- What alternatives for fathers work best?
- Is there a relationship between fatherlessness and poverty or crime?

Without denigrating single-parent moms, and all other alternatives to a father and mother raising children together, this topic will seek answers to the questions raised above. Articles, books, research and programs will be considered. As with other controversial issues, we should not allow the polarization of extremes or the strength with which we hold a particular position to squelch necessary discussion leading to improved social policy.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your experience (or lack thereof) with your father growing up?
2. What kind of a father did you hope to be, or to be married to, or see other children have?
3. What do you see as the main failures of fathers in society today?
4. What in your society makes it difficult for men to fulfill their role as fathers?
5. What questions about fatherhood would you like to see studied and discussed?
6. What is the relationship between good fathers, strong families, healthy communities and a good society?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Anecdotal evidence and now studies are beginning to confirm the importance of fathers.
2. Where fathers are missing, we should do all we can to support care-givers and strengthen families.
3. Where fathers are missing, we need to find the reasons and make necessary social changes that will allow boys and men to assume their rightful responsibilities.

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