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THE IMPORTANCE OF FATHERS

I. INTRODUCTION

The discussion of fathers' importance begins with the obvious—the importance of parents for children. As a species, our children are far more dependent on their parents, and for a far longer period of time, than the offspring of any other species on earth. We know from studying both children and parents that strong instincts, needs and reciprocities are provided by nature for this project: that is, for furthering the successful development of children into healthy and viable adults.

The contribution of parents, of both mothers and fathers, is based on what we call love: that is, on the deeply felt bond of care, protection and emotional connection that parents experience toward their children. Children come into the world equipped by nature to need this from their parents: they are dependent, and they instinctively bond to and love their caretakers. Not surprisingly, research has found that both parents are equally equipped, except for breast feeding, to deliver to children the care, protection, love and involved relationship which children need.

What is surprising is the finding that in addition to the general needs of parenting, which fathers and mothers each possess and deliver, children have specific needs or receptors for fathers. In addition to the general/common love, involved relationship, protection and care, which both parents possess, there are specific needs that fathers and mothers fulfill in the development of children, and these correspond with specific needs children have for each parent. The specific contribution of each parent depends on, and can only be delivered in, the context of the general bond, attachment and involved relationship with the child. It is the specific nature of the involvement that differs in some areas.

In summary, the discussion of the importance of fathers begins with children's needs for **both** a mother and a father. Each is equally equipped by nature to provide the general context of parental love, connection, attachment and involvement. But mothers cannot be fathers and fathers cannot be mothers. In Dr. Kyle Pruett's words (*Fatherneed: Why Father Care is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child*), children come into the world not only with needs for a parent: they also have motherneeds and fatherneeds.

What this means for children's beneficial development coincides with common sense and experience. Fathers and mothers are both equipped to provide the basic and

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fundamental parenting needs of children. Thus, if necessary, a child can get by with only a father or only a mother. However, the loss of an involved relationship with either one will be a significant disadvantage to the child's development. This is true from infancy onward.

Because the importance of mothers is well accepted (even by fathers, who when they have sole custody are nine times more likely to foster and support the children's relationship with their mother, than vice-versa), the purpose of this paper is to talk about the specific importance of fathers. It will become clear that one of the three primary needs of children in divorced families is an adequate, involved and meaningful relationship with both parents.

I. THE GENERAL IMPORTANCE OF FATHERS

The issue of the importance of fathers for children has been increasingly studied in the last twenty years. There are two general trends in the research. First are those studies which try to show that children can grow and develop and be all right without a father. The focus and findings of these studies try to demonstrate that father absence has damaging effects mostly because it is accompanied by deprivation and lowered socioeconomic status. These studies show that children without fathers are affected by many factors. The intent of this research seems to be twofold: 1) to encourage those families who do not have fathers that it is possible to raise healthy children without one; and 2) to show how economic and social factors also affect children's adjustment. However, if you turn this question around and look simply at the statistical association between fatherlessness and various problems, the data are scary. I have attached a recent summary of this data. Statistically, father absence is associated strongly with a number of serious problems in children. (In looking at these statistics, keep in mind that the effects are **not caused** by father absence alone, but also by a number of things that often accompany father absence, such as poverty and its many consequences.)

The other general trend in the research is the study of fathers' role and influence in the development of children. These studies attempt to discover what it is that children need from their fathers, and what is the effect of fathers on children's development. We know that father absence is harmful, and that there are a number of reasons for this. But what is the effect of **father presence**, and what specific needs do children have for fathering? The statistics in this regard are also interesting. Children who **feel closeness to their fathers** are two times more likely to go to college or find stable employment, are 75% less likely to create a baby in their teens, are 80% less likely to

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spend time in jail, and half as likely to experience depression. But how does this work and why is it so? In his *Fatherneed* book, Dr. Kyle Pruett has summarized his and others' findings about the particular importance of involved fathering for children's development. The following discussion draws heavily on this book.

Children have an innate ability from earliest infancy to distinguish fathers from mothers. This ability corresponds to and derives from children's specific needs for fathering. But children need the basic commonalities of parenting first, and fathers and mothers show a number of similarities in this regard. The depth of their felt love and attachment to the child is the same. They share strong instincts to nurture and protect the child. They both desire an emotional connection with the child throughout life. They are equally able to see and respond to children's cues for hunger, discomfort, fatigue, etc. They are similarly anxious about leaving the child in the care of a third party. They even have similar physiological reactions to the child's distress. They find single parenting similarly challenging and react to this in similar ways. In general, mothers and fathers have equal parenting abilities, along with the specific contribution of their gender. There is no evidence that women are biologically better equipped for parenting, except of course for nursing. Fathers and mothers have more similarities in competent parenting and nurturance than they do differences. This is why one parent, if necessary, can do the job.

It is the fact that fathers deliver parenting **differently** than mothers that seems to account for their particular importance to children's development, from infancy onward. Because the mother-child bond is so close, beginning as one body, the fact that fathers are equally close and important, yet **different**, seems to be of major importance. Fathers help children most with their individuation, their competence with the outside world, and their independence. This begins very early. After basic parental nurturing, fathers relate differently to their babies than mothers do. They tend to activate their babies, to play physically with them, to use their own bodies in play. Most interestingly, they tend to vary what they do with their babies, thus exposing the child to the novel, the unpredictable. Fathers encourage exploring, novelty, and even risk-taking. Fathers teach frustration tolerance and self-confidence in facing challenges. In disciplining children as they get older, fathers focus on the practical consequences of misbehavior more than the emotional consequences. Mothers, it seems, tend to focus on comfort, sameness, predictability, and the emotional/personal issues in their children's lives. Mother's style promotes adjustment to the family, while father's style promotes adjustment to the world. There are overlaps between fathers and mothers, of course, but the distinctive styles and their effects are very interesting. It is so clear that children

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need both just as they need both a successful personal adjustment to their family and an adequately functional relationship with the world.

III. SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTIONS OF FATHERS

The many benefits of involved fathering that have been studied seem consistent with this general orientation.

- Even as infants, children with involved fathers are more secure in exploring the world. They are more curious and less hesitant, especially in novel situations. They show a greater tolerance for stress and frustration, and a greater readiness or self-confidence to try new things.
- Involved fathering also affects children's cognitive functioning. Boys especially, but also girls, show higher IQ's, and stronger verbal and math skills. Later, academic achievement is strongly related to father involvement. One interesting finding, which shows how children must have specific receptors for fathers, has to do with the effect of parents reading to children. In 1963, Ellen Bing reported her surprising finding that father reading was associated with better cognitive abilities, especially high verbal skills in daughters. Mother reading did not show this effect. (However, mother reading probably has some other important effect consistent with the child's motherneeds.)
- It is well known that the mother-child relationship is very important for the development of the child's capacity for interpersonal attachment. It turns out that children also form a deep and important attachment to their fathers, and this attachment helps their sense of security, helps their tolerance of separation, and increases their ability to form attachments to others in the world, outside the family. An enhanced relationship with father also helps and contributes to the mother-child bond. Father involvement is also associated with the development of empathy in children, which continues into their adult lives.
- It is beneficial for children, and adults, to see the other gender first and foremost as people, not principally as boys or girls, men or women. Children with involved fathers have this quality and show less gender-role stereotyping than children without father involvement. For boys, the effect depends on the father himself having balanced attitudes. Whereas for girls, the effect seems to occur just because he is a man and is involved.

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- Just as father deprivation is strongly associated with lowered self-control, behavior problems and delinquency; so father involvement is strongly associated with self-control, conformity to rules, and a good social adjustment. Along with this come better peer-relationships, more social confidence, and appropriate maturity.
- The development of conscience and moral sensitivity is also enhanced by positive father involvement. Even very young children show more generosity—more of an ability to put themselves out for someone else. Increased conscience and practical social awareness lead to more responsibility, less rule breaking and disruptiveness, and less sadness and depression. Boys show fewer behavior problems; while girls show more cheerful and happy relationships, better self-esteem, and more confidence in trying new things. Overall, for boys and girls, positive father involvement is associated with more positive social behavior and a better sense of right and wrong.
- For reasons that are not clear, newborns and infants who have an involved father are healthier physically than those who don't.
- Mothers are clearly very important for children. Mothers who are supported by fathers make better mothers, and this is another way fathers can help the development of their children. The same can be said for fathers who are supported by mothers. In fact, fathers show a greater enhancement of parenting from mother support than vice versa. Finally, father-care can and often does compensate for and ameliorate the effects of a sick or maladjusted mother.
- For both children and parents, support and co-operation from the other parent enhances parenting effects. For children, on the other hand, conflict, tension, or animosity between parents diminishes and can even defeat parenting effects, such that even good parenting does not have the desired results.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

In thinking about how it works—how fathers actually cause such beneficial effects in children's development—Dr. Pruett offers these very interesting reflections (page 57, *Fatherneed*):

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“Father influences may be especially important precisely because they are influences not of the mother. A dad begins to enhance his child’s maturation and autonomy by balancing the powerful pull toward the mother; he does this merely by being an interesting non-mother partner in his own right. His very differentness from the mother as a physical being—his smells, textures, voice, rhythms, sighs—promote an awareness in his child that it is okay to be different and okay to desire and love the inherently different, the not-mother entities of the world. A father’s separateness from the mother, in combination with this constancy, gives the child a safe haven in the storms over autonomy that blow up so fiercely in the second year of life. ‘My mother myself’ is hardly the whole story.

Dads offer intriguing and exciting imitative opportunities for safe and loving social interactions with a not-mother entity. This shores up self-regard and self-confidence when it matters most, in the early formation of personality...Fathers promote children’s acceptance of the real world by emotionally taking them to the mountain, teaching them to climb, showing them the world, and, over time, showing them the way through and around it. Even when men serve as primary caregivers, this role stays in their hands, and children seem to count on them to fulfil that emotional promise to get them, safe and whole, into the real world beyond their mother’s arms.”

If this is true, it would help explain why it is damaging to children for a mother to keep the children for herself after divorce, excluding their father from their lives, or obstructing his parental involvement. It would also mean there are real benefits, even for infants, in having time alone with their fathers, in the absence of mother. Mothers are prone to argue for home, for routine, for sameness, for stability. They feel their bond with the infant is of primary importance. Yet recent studies are showing that this is truer for the mother than for the infant. Infants can and do also bond with their fathers and get contributions from him that are very important for their development. Infants are equipped to be secure with either parent (given adequate familiarity), and some novelty can be beneficial, as are familiarity and predictability. Routine is important, but so is the continuity of important relationships. Mothers are important, but so are fathers.

As with mothers, so with fathers—it is **quality** that counts most. The overall value and effect of each parent depends on the quality of that parent’s care for and interaction with the child. The degree to which the parent is sensitive to the child’s needs and reactions, the degree to which the parent can see and react to the child objectively and constructively, determines the overall value of that parent’s contribution. This is the software, which can only be activated with adequate hardware: that is, with sufficient

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time and real-life exposure between the parent and child. Frequent, responsible interaction in real life is the necessary condition for the delivery of fathering (or mothering) to the child. For a father, **what** he does and **how** he does it, and **who** he is, are more important than how long or how often he does it. But without adequate time on a regular basis, even the best father cannot deliver the goods.

It is not necessary to be the best father, anymore than to be the best mother. For the child, the father that is given and that loves the child is the one that is needed. Unless the father is very disturbed or abusive, the child needs him. Even less-than-average is beneficial. Studies show that three simple and basic things in fathers positively affect his child's development: 1) his warmth, even if he is not especially involved; 2) his masculinity alone—the fact that he is a man; and 3) his different-from-mother socialization and relationship behavior (Henry Biller and Norma Radin). In addition to this, of course, the more involvement the better.

Divorce represents the major challenge to involved fathering. The challenge is rooted in the parents, not in the child. The child has needs and receptors for both parents. But all too often sharing, seeing the value of the other parent, and supporting the role of the other parent, are casualties of the marital breakdown. Even when parents can rise above their own pain and keep their eyes on the child, the very nature of their parenting instincts presents a challenge. Because they are different, and because they have hurt each other, it is difficult for them to esteem, support and foster the other parent's different involvement with what is most precious and sacred to them—their children. Statistically, mothers have more difficulty in this regard than fathers. Society also has tended to focus on the more evident and visible importance of mothers for children, at the neglect of the equally important but less obvious importance of fathers.

Mothers, and society, know that a home and family, with some stability and consistency and predictability, are important for children's development. They are right. This is like saying, "Children need mothers and what mothers have to offer." But it is increasingly evident that children also need fathers. Thus, they need not only a home but also both parents. A functional marriage is the easy way to furnish both of these things at once. With divorce, these two needs compete against each other: mothers argue for home and stability, while fathers argue for the importance of two parents and sufficient time to accomplish meaningful parenting.

Too often, both parents forget that children need something even more than either one of them. Children can be raised successfully without one of their parents, though not without cost and challenge and some detriment. But what children need even more

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than both parents is **peace**. This is true in both married and divorced families. It is inter-parental conflict that constantly shows up as the major cause of children's maladjustment and problems. I believe it is **because** children need both parents so much, that is, **because** they are programmed by nature to love and bond deeply with both parents and have specific needs for both, that conflict is so destructive. How can children comfortably love two people who hate each other or who are in constant tension or conflict with each other? Other than abuse, there seem to be two things that cause serious and long-term detriment to children's development: bad marriages and bad divorces. The trick in making a good divorce for children is to find a way to provide the children with three things: **peace, two real and involved parents, and a home**. Ways of doing this would be the subject of another paper.

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EFFECTS OF FATHERLESSNESS (US DATA)

Stuart Birks (www.massey.ac.nz/~Birks/gender/econ/nodad.htm)

24 January, 1996

(In looking at these statistics, keep in mind that the effects are **not caused** by father absence alone, but also by a number of things that often accompany father absence, such as poverty and its many consequences. G.K.)

1) **BEHAVIORAL DISORDERS/ RUNAWAYS/ HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUTS/
 CHEMICAL ABUSERS/ SUICIDES**

- 85% of all children that exhibit behavioral disorders come from fatherless homes (Source: Center for Disease Control)
- 90% of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes (Source: *U.S. D.H.H.S.*, Bureau of the Census)
- 71% of all high school dropouts come from fatherless homes (Source: *National Principals Association Report on the State of High Schools.*)
- 75% of all adolescent patients in chemical abuse centers come from fatherless homes (Source: *Rainbows for all God's Children.*)

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- 63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes (Source: *U.S. D.H.H.S.*, Bureau of the Census)

2) **JUVENILE DELINQUENCY/ CRIME/ GANGS**

- 80% of rapists motivated with displaced anger come from fatherless homes (Source: *Criminal Justice & Behavior*, Vol. 14, p. 403-26, 1978)
- 70% of juveniles in state-operated institutions come from fatherless homes (Source: U.S. Dept. of Justice, *Special Report*, Sept 1988)
- 85% of all youths sitting in prisons grew up in a fatherless home (Source: *Fulton Co. Georgia jail populations*, Texas Dept. of Corrections 1992)

These statistics translate to mean that children from a fatherless home are:

- 5 times more likely to commit suicide.
- 32 times more likely to run away.
- 20 times more likely to have behavioral disorders.
- 14 times more likely to commit rape
- 9 times more likely to drop out of high school.
- 10 times more likely to abuse chemical substances.
- 9 times more likely to end up in a state-operated institution.
- 20 times more likely to end up in prison.

3) **TEENAGE PREGNANCY**

- "Daughters of single parents are 53% more likely to marry as teenagers, 164% more likely to have a premarital birth, and 92% more likely to dissolve their own marriages. All these intergenerational consequences of single motherhood increase the likelihood of chronic welfare dependency." Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *Atlantic Monthly* (April 1993).

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- Daughters of single parents are 2.1 times more likely to have children during their teenage years than are daughters from intact families. The Good Family Man, David Blankenhorn.
- 71% of teenage pregnancies are to children of single parents. U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services.

4) **CHILD ABUSE**

- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services states that there were more than 1,000,000 documented child abuse cases in 1990. In 1983, it found that 60% of perpetrators were women with sole custody. Shared parenting can significantly reduce the stress associated with sole custody, and reduce the isolation of children in abusive situations by allowing both parents' to monitor the children's health and welfare and to protect them.

5) **KIDNAPPING**

- Family abductions were 163,200 compared to non-family abductions of 200-300. The parental abductions were attributed to the parents' disenchantment with the legal system. David Levy, Ed., *The Best Parent is Both Parents* (1993), citing a report from the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice (May 1990).