

## THE PLIGHT OF SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES\*

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Research findings from abroad regarding the effects of the father-absent family on the child and on the mother were reviewed. While both negative and positive effects were pointed out, it was also stressed that the role that the father played in the child's development and in the family structure would first have to be understood before a proper evaluation of the effect that his absence would have could be made. An attempt was made to relate such findings to the Philippine situation wherein more and more fathers and husbands are leaving for the Middle East, thus leaving behind them a growing number of single-parent families. Factors which may help in reducing the effect of the father's absence were identified, and suggestions were made regarding how psychologists and health providers could take a more active role in weaving these factors into more concrete programs to help those who are left behind.

In the USA we have become increasingly interested in the role of the father in a child's development. Prior to the women's revolution, most of the attention about parenting was on the effect of the mother upon the child. In fact, during the fifties, when the child guidance clinics were in their prime, the preferred form of treatment was for the psychiatrist or psychologist to see the child and the social worker to see the mother. No one insisted the father be involved. Today, with the advent of family therapy, we know that if fathers are asked to be involved, they do become interested in the therapy.

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To understand the effect of being a single parent, one has to first acknowledge and understand the role of the father in a child's development. If the father has no role except that of a provider, then if he is absent in order to provide economic security for his family, such as by going to Saudi Arabia, this should have a limited negative effect on the family since he is merely fulfilling his primary role of provider. However, if the role of the father in the child's development is much more than just as a provider, then one would expect that the separation of the father from the family — from the wife and children — would have a significant effect, regardless of the cause for, or purpose of, the separation.

Based on what our current research is telling us about the importance of the father in a child's development, I would predict that you here in the Philippines will experience a major cultural change as a result of the separation of fathers from their families for economic reasons. I understand that this phenomenon has been increasing since

1975. The effect now is probably primarily on individuals and individual family units. However, as the children of these fathers grow up, this will probably result in a change in your society.

In the USA, following World War II, we had a birth explosion. This generation was the generation that introduced so many changes in our values. There are many who feel that the women's revolution in the United States grew out of the women's experiences during the war when their husbands and fathers were absent. Women developed an increased sense of their own competency, their own ability to manage, to be effective. Their children then grew up in a home where women were struggling to find a multi-faceted identity, no longer content to be housewives. Your culture has a different perception of women, but I would expect the phenomenon to be similar. The absence of a husband or father has multiple effects. His absence affects the child's development and his absence affects how his wife perceives herself. The single parent experiences a change in her perception of herself. The child of a single parent is affected in his/her development by the absence of the father.

I would like to share with you what our research suggests the father contributes to the child's development and I would like to illustrate this by case examples from my own work both at the hospital and in my private practice.

Fathers affect a child's self-concept, sexual identity, anxiety level, impulsivity, moral development, self-control, delinquent behavior, cognitive development, and achievement in school. The father, then, affects the total child.

We see this over and over again in our practices. How often have you heard a parent say, "He seems like a different child when his father comes home." Or a mother complain, "I can't control her at all but the minute her father comes home, she's an angel." What

does it mean then in a single-parent family? It means the balance is gone — without the father's presence, the child does not experience different facets of himself.

For daughters, Biller found that girls who had been raised for a period of time in a single-parent family had more divorces, separations, and unhappy marriages than daughters who had not had an absent father.

Let's look closer at some of the attributes a father brings to his child's development. Money and Erhardt found that the first 2 or 3 years of a child's life were crucial to the formulation of an individual's sexual orientation. Boys whose fathers were absent for a period of time before the boy was 5 were found to be less secure in their masculine role. This resulted in either exaggerated masculine or feminine characteristics. In the latter case, when the fathers returned and the boys were perceived as "sissy," the father's return was very stressful and aggression increased.

How does the father affect anxiety? It was found that the increased anxiety of the children was related in part to an over-intense relationship with the mother. If there is also concern with the father's safety, this will exacerbate the general level of tension in the family. There appear to be two critical periods in a child's development for fostering over-dependency — that is, the absence of the father at 9 months and between the ages 2 and 3. It's interesting that informal interviews with the mothers indicated they were preoccupied with their children being physically injured.

Discipline is a crucial factor in a child's development. Fathers play an important role in the discipline pattern of a family. This, in turn, influences moral development, self-control, and delinquent behavior. Many studies from Glueck and Glueck (1950) have found that there is more delinquency among boys from single-parent families than among boys from two-parent families. McCord,

McCord and Thusher found lower class boys without fathers committed more felonies than father-present boys — although gang delinquency was the same for both groups. We know how important peers are at a certain stage in a child's life. As more of your children experience a period during their lives when a father is absent, this will change the peer group. More and more peers will be similarly affected by being in homes with only their mother as parent.

I think the following study really illustrates the role of the father during the early years in moral development. Seegman (1966) analyzed medical students' responses to an anonymous questionnaire concerning their childhood experiences. He compared the responses of students who had been without a father for at least one year during their first few years of life with those of students who had been continuously father-present. The father-absent group admitted to a greater degree of anti-social behavior during childhood.

Concerning the child's cognitive development, there are some fascinating studies being published about the role of the father in this area. Generally, boys do better than girls on math tests and girls do better than boys on tests of verbal abilities. Recent research is suggesting that for boys, where the father has been absent for a period of time prior to the age of 5, they get a higher verbal score than math score on College Aptitude tests.

Lessing, Zagarin and Nelson found father absence was associated with relatively low ability in perceptual motor tasks. In formal testing, this is seen in low scores on Block Design and Object Assembly in the WISC-R.

Regarding the effect of father's presence or absence and level of involvement upon his son's academic functioning, I would like to share a study by Blanchard and Biller. They studied Third Grade boys of average intelligence. One group had fathers present

less than 6 hours a week and in the last group, the fathers were available more than 2 hours a day. The boys were similar in terms of age, IQ, socio-economic status, and the presence or absence of male siblings.

The children whose fathers were absent before the age of 3 were under-achievers, had lower grades, and scored significantly lower on every achievement test index. The boys whose fathers were absent after the age of 5 and the boys whose fathers were present less than 6 hours a week functioned somewhat below grade level while the high father-present boys performed above grade level. In another study, it was found again that the most detrimental effects occurred when father absence was due to divorce, desertion, or separation, rather than death.

Just in summary then, research is suggesting that the absence of a father before the child is 5 can result in a disturbance of sexual identification, increased anxiety, interference in discipline patterns which result in less impulse control and more anti-social behavior, lowered achievement in school, and changes in cognitive processes particularly affecting math abilities.

What is the effect on the mother? When I have a single parent in therapy, the primary theme I hear over and over is, there is no relief. Even if there is an extended family, there is no substitute for sharing the responsibility of raising children with the children's father. The mother may find herself, if she has been able to achieve some independence, pulled back into a dependent role with her own parents.

In your country, when the father is leaving for Saudi Arabia to "make things better for his family," it would make it harder for the wife to express her anger. How can you be angry at someone who is just trying to make things better for the whole family? And yet we know, where there is loss, there is anger, and underneath the warm thoughts are the

angry feelings — the bitterness, the scare. The woman underneath the single parent is frequently an angry and scared child who feels confused and guilty about her feelings. I would imagine that you have seen an increase in somatic symptoms among your single parents. During our discussion, I will be very interested in your findings regarding how the wives and the mothers handle the separation — in particular the anger. In the States, we have found an increase in child abuse among the single parents; the mother takes out her anger toward the father by hitting the child. In my country, we have a saying which acknowledges the irrationality of being angry with someone for leaving when the person had to leave. "How can you be mad at your grandmother for dying?" But we are angry when people whom we love leave us — even if we know it's for our own good.

If a woman has a job and enjoys her work, this has been found to be helpful, although in the States, we are beginning to find that women who work, particularly if they are single-parents, are experiencing stress-related health problems usually associated with men such as ulcers and heart attacks. Still, if a woman has a significant interest outside the home, it reduces the negative effects of the separation.

A child, if she or he is lucky, may have for a period of time a surrogate father, but a wife cannot have a surrogate husband. She may have a man or men who assume several of the male roles — help her with finances, fix things around the house — but the physical aspects of a marriage are of course not allowed to be transferred.

My mother sent me an article recently that stated 6 hugs a day are vital for health. We need affection, physical closeness; it contributes to our physical and emotional well-being.

A woman left alone for a period of time will discover the strengths within herself — her

own competencies; and this will affect the relationship when the man returns. The defenses which are erected to protect her from loneliness won't go away over-night and he may experience this as rejection. It's important that the couple know that it won't be easy to come back together — that there will be a period of adjustment.

Separation produces a longing, a sense of emptiness. There are several types: permanent, temporary, long-term, short-term. A temporary separation in some ways is harder than permanent separation such as death because of the lack of resolution — leaving the wife in a state of suspended animation.

Spitz's studies of emotional deprivation demonstrated that infants can die under extreme conditions of separation. This doesn't happen with a single parent, but there is a longing for the absent parent. We can look at the literature on depression to understand how a child attempts to deal with the loss of a parent. First of all, children do not have time concepts which are the same as adults. To tell a child his father will be gone for but a year does not reassure the young child. If you are two, one year's absence will be a third of your life, the equivalent for a twenty-year-old of being gone 10 years.

For younger children below the age of two, the loss of an important person in their lives frequently is seen in their eating and sleeping patterns. The loss is experienced as a loss of a part of their being. For children who lose a parent early, there is an inner sense of emptiness. If the mother then points to objects and says, "We have these because your father is gone," the child may acquire a need for objects in an attempt to fill the inner sense of emptiness.

For the older child, above the age of 5, the child, particularly a male child, may attempt to retain the father by emulating him. You may hear statements such as, "He's beginning to walk just like his father," or "Sometimes it

frightens me how he sounds just like my husband."

This can really disrupt a boy's sense of his own self when the mother encourages the boy to take over the role of the father – to sleep in her bed, to discipline the younger children.

In families where the father is returning, this produces double trouble. Not only is the boy's normal development interrupted, but the father's return is met with ambivalence because it means a loss of status, of privileges, of power.

I have been concentrating on single-parent families which are due to temporary separation. I would like to share briefly some information about the effects of a permanent separation.

For girls, when there is separation because the father has gone to live with another woman, an interesting phenomenon can occur. The daughter may identify with the father's new woman as a way to attempt to regain the father.

The factors that may help to reduce the effect of the father's absence are the following:

1. The presence of surrogate fathers – there needs to be an attachment;
2. The realistic presentation of the situation to the child and not just an idealized explanation. The child, however, should also be given an opportunity to express sadness and anger;
3. Supports for the mother – other interests, employment, recognition of the difficulty of her position, her loneliness;
4. Older male siblings;
5. Recognition on the part of society at large that this is a change that is stressful for the family;

6. A positive mother-child relationship;
7. The father and mother talking ahead about values – the mother being aware of those values that the father has which she does not stress and her actively attempting to develop them in the child and praising the child by saying, "That would please your father."
8. Memory aids – pictures, personal gifts, letters left behind for critical times; and
9. A male teacher or mentor.

How can we help as psychologists and as health providers? First of all, we can help them through our individual work with the children and their families. Before the separation, we can help them plan and we can help to prepare them for the impact of the separation. During the separation, we can give them support and help reduce the negative effects. Afterwards, we can help by easing the transition.

Secondly, we can help by sharing our knowledge of the role of separation and the importance of both the father and the mother, so that we may reduce these families' feelings that what they are experiencing is unique to themselves. Our role may be similar to that of a support group that makes us feel less strange and more connected with others.

Thirdly, we can help by attempting to influence our institution, businesses, and schools so that the impact of this major change upon families is properly recognized. We may also try to influence the business and government sectors to share with us the responsibility for reducing as much as possible the negative effects of single-parent families.

You have an opportunity to study the effect of a major change. I hope some of you will do research for I believe we would all have something to gain by what you learn.