

A World Without Fathers

by David Popenoe

The decline of fatherhood is one of the most basic, unexpected, and extraordinary social trends of our time. Its dimensions can be captured in a single statistic: in just three decades, between 1960 and 1990, the percentage of children living apart from their biological fathers more than doubled, from 17 percent to 36 percent. By the turn of the century, nearly 50 percent of American children may be going to sleep each evening without being able to say good night to their dads.

No one predicted this trend, few researchers or government agencies have monitored it, and it is not widely discussed, even today. But the decline of fatherhood is a major force behind many of the most disturbing problems that plague American society: crime and delinquency; premature sexuality and out-of-wedlock births to teenagers; deteriorating educational achievement; depression, substance abuse, and alienation among adolescents; and the growing number of women and children in poverty.

The current generation of children and youth may be the first in our nation's history to be less well off—psychologically, socially, economically, and morally—than their parents were at the same age. The United States, observes Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D.-N.Y.), “may be the first society in history in which children are distinctly worse off than adults.”

Even as this calamity unfolds, our cultural view of fatherhood itself is changing. Few people doubt the fundamental importance of mothers. But fathers? More and more, the question of whether fathers are really necessary is being raised. Many would answer no, or maybe not. And to the degree that fathers are still thought necessary, fatherhood is said by many to be merely a social role that others can play: mothers, partners, stepfathers, uncles and aunts, grandparents. Perhaps the script can even be rewritten and the role changed—or dropped.

There was a time in the past when fatherlessness was far more common than it is today, but death was to blame, not divorce, desertion, and out-of-wedlock births. In early-17th-century Virginia, only an estimated 31 percent





Impedimenta (1958), by Hughie Lee-Smith

of white children reached age 18 with both parents still alive. That percentage climbed to 50 percent by the early 18th century, to 72 percent by the turn of the present century, and close to its current level by 1940. Today, well over 90 percent of America's youngsters reach 18 with two living parents. Almost all of today's fatherless children have fathers who are alive, well, and perfectly capable of shouldering the responsibilities of fatherhood. Who would ever have thought that so many men would choose to relinquish them?

Not so long ago, the change in the cause of fatherlessness was dismissed as irrelevant in many quarters, including among social scientists. Children, it was said, are merely losing their parents in a different way than they used to. You don't hear that very much anymore. A surprising finding of recent social science research is that it is decidedly worse for a

child to lose a father in the modern, voluntary way than through death. The children of divorced and never-married mothers are less successful in life by almost every measure than the children of widowed mothers. The replacement of death by divorce as the prime cause of fatherlessness, then, is a monumental setback in the history of childhood.

Until the 1960s, the falling death rate and the rising divorce rate neutralized each other. In 1900, the percentage of all American children living in single-parent families was 8.5 percent. By 1960, it had increased to just 9.1 percent. Virtually no one during those years was writing or thinking about family breakdown, disintegration, or decline.

Indeed, what is most significant about the changing family demography of the first six decades of the 20th century is this: because the death rate was dropping faster than the divorce rate was rising, by 1960 more children were living with both of their natural parents than at any other time in world history. The figure was close to 80 percent for the generation born in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

But then the decline in the death rate slowed, and the divorce rate skyrocketed. "The scale of marital breakdowns in the West since 1960 has no historical precedent that I know of, and seems unique," says Lawrence Stone, the noted Princeton University family historian. "There has been nothing like it for the last 2,000 years, and probably longer."

Consider what has happened to children. Most estimates are that only about 50 percent of the children born during the 1970–84 "baby bust" period

will still live with their natural parents by age 17—a staggering drop from nearly 80 percent.

One estimate paints the current scene in even starker terms and also points up the enormous difference that exists between whites and blacks. By age 17, white children born between 1950 and 1954 had spent eight percent of their lives with only one parent; black children had spent 22 percent. But among those born in 1980, by one estimate, white children will spend 31 percent of their childhood years with one parent and black children 59 percent.

In theory, divorce need not mean disconnection. In reality, it often does. One large survey in the late 1980s found that about one in five divorced fathers had not seen his children in the past year, and less than half of divorced fathers saw their children more than several times a year. A 1981 survey of adolescents who were living apart from their fathers found that 52 percent had not seen them at all in more than a year; only 16 percent saw their fathers as often as once a week. Moreover, the survey showed fathers' contact with their children dropping off sharply with the passage of time after the marital breakup.

The picture grows worse. Just as divorce has overtaken death as the leading cause of fatherlessness, out-of-wedlock births are expected to surpass divorce later in the 1990s. They accounted for 30 percent of all births by 1991; by the turn of the century they may account for 40 percent of the total (and 80 percent of minority births). And there is substantial evidence that having an unmarried father is even worse for a child than having a divorced father.

Across time and cultures, fathers have always been considered essential—and not just for their sperm. Indeed, until today, no known society ever thought of fathers as potentially unnecessary. Marriage and the nuclear family—mother, father, and children—are the most universal social institutions in existence. In no society has the birth of children out of wedlock been the cultural norm. To the contrary, a concern for the legitimacy of children is nearly universal.

At the same time, being a father is universally problematic for men. While mothers the world over bear and nurture their young with an intrinsic acknowledgment and, most commonly, acceptance of their role, the process of taking on the role of father is often filled with conflict and doubt. The source of this sex-role difference can be plainly stated. Men are not biologically as attuned to being committed fathers as women are to being committed mothers. The evolutionary logic is clear. Women, who can bear only a limited number of children, have a great incentive to invest their energy in rearing children, while men, who can father many offspring, do not. Left culturally unregulated, men's sexual behavior can be promiscuous, their paternity casual, their commitment to families weak. This not to say that the role of father is foreign to male nature. Far from it. Evolutionary scientists tell us that the development of the fathering capacity and high paternal investments in offspring—features not common among our primate relatives—have been sources of enor-

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mous evolutionary advantage for human beings.

In recognition of the fatherhood problem, human cultures have used sanctions to bind men to their children, and of course the institution of marriage has been culture's chief vehicle. Marriage is society's way of signaling that the community approves and encourages sexual intercourse and the birth of children, and that the long-term relationship of the parents is socially important. Margaret Mead once said, with the fatherhood problem very much in mind, that there is no society in the world where men will stay married for very long unless culturally required to do so. Our experience in late-20th-century America shows how right she was. The results for children have been devastating.

In my many years as a sociologist, I have found few other bodies of evidence that lean so much in one direction as this one: on the whole, two parents—a father and a mother—are better for a child than one parent. There are, to be sure, many factors that complicate this simple proposition. We all know of a two-parent family that is truly dysfunctional—the proverbial family from hell. A child can certainly be raised to a fulfilling adulthood by one loving parent who is wholly devoted to the child's well-being. But such exceptions do not invalidate the rule any more than the fact that some three-pack-a-day smokers live to a ripe old age casts doubt on the dangers of cigarettes.

The collapse of children's well-being in the United States has reached breathtaking proportions. Juvenile violent crime has increased sixfold, from 16,000 arrests in 1960 to 96,000 in 1992, a period in which the total number of young people in the population remained relatively stable. Reports of child neglect and abuse have quintupled since 1976, when data were first collected. Eating disorders and rates of depression have soared among adolescent girls. Teen suicide has tripled. Alcohol and drug abuse among teenagers, although it has leveled off in recent years, continues at a very high rate. Scholastic Aptitude Test scores have declined nearly 80 points, and most of the decline cannot be accounted for by the increased academic diversity of students taking the test. Poverty has shifted from the elderly to the young. Of all the nation's poor today, 38 percent are children.

One can think of many explanations for these unhappy developments: the growth of commercialism and consumerism, the influence of television and the mass media, the decline of religion, the widespread availability of guns and addictive drugs, and the decay of social order and neighborhood relationships. None of these causes should be dismissed. But the evidence is now strong that the absence of fathers from the lives of children is one of the most important causes.

The most tangible and immediate consequence of fatherlessness for children is the loss of economic resources. By the best recent estimates, the income of the household in which a child remains after a divorce instantly declines by about 21 percent per capita on average, while expenses tend to go up. Over time, the economic situation for the child often deteriorates further. The mother usually earns considerably less than the father, and children cannot rely on their fathers to pay much in the way of child support. About half of previously married mothers receive no child support, and for those who do receive it, both the reliability and the amount of the payment drop over time.

Fatherhood: New, Old, and Natural

It's ironic that the contemporary plague of fatherlessness has been accompanied by so much talk of a "new," more caring and nurturing father. In a sense, however, the new father has been a work in progress for more than a century.

The stereotypical stern and unforgiving patriarch, often cast as the villain of the Victorian family, ceased to exist as a model—if he ever existed at all—with the decline of the Puritan family. (Evidently, it was a rapid fall: by the middle of the 18th century, paternal authority had faded to such a degree that an estimated 40 percent of all New England brides were pregnant when they exchanged their wedding vows.) The Puritan paterfamilias sank under the weight of Enlightenment ideas about freedom, personal happiness, and equality. As the authority of the state and religious institutions waned, moreover, many thinkers looked to the family as the place where civic virtues would be instilled in the newly autonomous citizen (mainly, of course, the white male citizen), and the warm and relatively egalitarian Quaker family was held up as a model. One follower of Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote of the Quaker man: he "is a good husband, for putting his whole happiness in his family life, he is forced to be good in order to be loved, and he can be happy only by making those around him happy."

The decisive change in the rise of the modern nuclear family, however, came with the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the early 19th century. "Family life," in the words of historian John Demos, "was wrenched apart from the world of work." No longer was the family chiefly a unit of economic production, intimately bound to other families in a larger community through economic, religious, and personal ties. Instead, the family became a place of refuge, or what the late Christopher Lasch called a "haven in a heartless world."

As income-producing work left the home, so too (during the weekday) did the men, withdrawing from full-time parenting and assuming instead the more limited role of breadwinner. For the first time in American history on a large scale, the home became the woman's domain. The husband, once the master of the house, became instead his wife's part-time assistant. Conservatives deplored the trend. "Paternal neglect," wrote the author of an 1842 article with that title in *Parents Magazine*, had become "epidemic." But the more the new industrial order stressed mobility and materialism, the more the family seemed to stress cooperation, love, and self-sacrifice. "The true home is a world within a world," Mrs. E. B. Duffey wrote in *What Women Should Know* (1873). "It is the central point of the universe around which all things revolve. It is the treasure-house of the affections, the one serenely bright spot in all the world, toward which its absent members always look with hope and anticipation."

The modern nuclear family ran under a drastically revised emotional constitution. Unlike its predecessor, it was devoted chiefly to the needs and care of children. It was also the first large-scale family system based mainly on romantic love. "True love" was thought to be a divinely endowed gift, and it was considered to be both the basis of a good marriage and the best path to self-fulfillment. Marriage, once thought of as first and foremost a utilitarian partnership, became warmer. The overall emotional temperature of the family rose. Alexis de Tocqueville spotted the change early in the century: "Everyone has noticed that . . . a new relationship has evolved between the different members of a family, that the distance formerly separating father and son has diminished, and that paternal authority, if not abolished, has at least changed form. . . . The master and the magistrate have vanished; the father remains."

By the mid-19th century, the first murmurings about a "new father"—more nurturing, less concerned with disciplining his children—were being heard. Yet as the century wore on, there was an important change in writings about the family. More and more, the male was thought of as a husband first, a father second.

There is no question that the cultural expectation of male leadership remained strong in the Victorian family. "When the family is instituted by marriage, it is the man who is head and chief magistrate by the force of his physical power and requirement of the

chief responsibility; not less is he so according to the Christian law, by which, when differences arise, the husband has the deciding control, and the wife is to obey,” wrote Catherine E. Beecher and her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe in their widely read 1869 book, *The American Woman’s Home*. But having been pushed out of the home and into the cold and impersonal world of the marketplace, many men sought after and treasured the intense, emotional world of women and family, which brought them some assurances of a meaningful private life.

Both female and male writers glorified women’s domestic roles, urging women to rise to new heights of moral and spiritual perfection and to use their domestic powers to the utmost in shaping civilization. Child-rearing advice literature, once directed almost exclusively at men, now spoke to women. Women, not men, led the family prayers and minded the family’s religious obligations. Replacing the traditional distrust of maternal indulgence was an elevated appreciation of maternal tenderness. Patience, kindness, and affection were now thought to be necessary not only for good child rearing but for human progress and the very salvation of the social order. “The foundation of our national character,” declared the popular 19th-century writer Josiah Gilbert Holland, “is laid by the mothers of the nation.”

In the very forces that created the modern nuclear family lay some of the roots of its decline: the over-reliance on romantic love, the increasing focus of marriage on the self-fulfillment of adults, the decline of a religious bond, the removal of fathers from many day-to-day family activities. Signs of discontent began to appear even before the century was through.

Many Americans still live in what are now called “traditional” families, but as a widespread cultural ideal the modern nuclear family died during the 1960s and 1970s. It still has much to teach us, however—especially since no fully satisfactory alternative has been discovered. This family represented a bargain between the sexes: men would work hard to provide economic support and would constrain their sexual appetites if women would stay at home and provide them with sex, children, and a warm domestic environment. Both parents would sacrifice for their children. Today there is a sense among both men and women that this arrangement requires them to give up too much—and that even if they accept it, they cannot count on their partners to do the same. Recementing the family will require some kind of new bargain between them.

Will a “new father” be part of the bargain? It’s true that today’s active fathers are more playful, more engaged, and warmer with their children than their own fathers and grandfathers were. And that is all to the good. But there is much evidence that men are very different from women in their parenting styles, and that striving for parental androgyny—making daddies into mommies—has little to recommend it.

Yet the evidence from the human evolutionary and anthropological record does not indicate that there is anything “natural” about the “patriarchal” father either. The !Kung San of northwestern Botswana, for example, give us some indication of what life may have been like among our hunter-gatherer ancestors. !Kung San fathers are closely involved with their children, and spend much of their free time with them. “They often hold and fondle even the youngest infants,” write anthropologists Mary Katz and Melvin Konner, “though they return them to the mother whenever they cry and for all forms of routine care. Young children frequently go to them, touch them, talk to them, and request food from them, and such approaches are almost never rebuffed.” Boys have easy relationships with their fathers as they grow up.

It is probably unrealistic to hope for a completely new father. But in creating a “revised father,” we would be wise to consult the Victorians and the !Kung San as well as our own desires.



A !Kung San father and son

—David Popenoe

Child poverty, once endemic in America, reached a historic low point of 14 percent in 1969 and remained relatively stable through the 1970s. Since then, it has been inching back up. Today more than 20 percent of the nation's children (and 25 percent of infants and toddlers) are growing up in poverty.

The loss of fathers' income is the most important cause of this alarming change. By one estimate, 51 percent of the increase in child poverty observed during the 1980s (65 percent for blacks) can be attributed to changes in family structure. Indeed, much of the income differential between whites and blacks today, perhaps as much as two-thirds, can be attributed to the differences in family structure. Not for nothing is it said that marriage is the best antipoverty program of all.

The proliferation of mother-headed families now constitutes something of a national economic emergency. About a quarter of all family groups with children—more than half of all black family groups—are headed by mothers, which is almost double the 11.5 percent figure in 1970. No other group is so poor, and none stays poor longer. Poverty afflicts nearly one out of every two of these families, but fewer than one in 10 married-couple families. Mother-headed families account for 94 percent of the current caseload for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

Things are likely to get worse before they get better. Poverty is much more severe among unmarried mothers—the fastest-growing segment of the poverty population—than among divorced mothers.

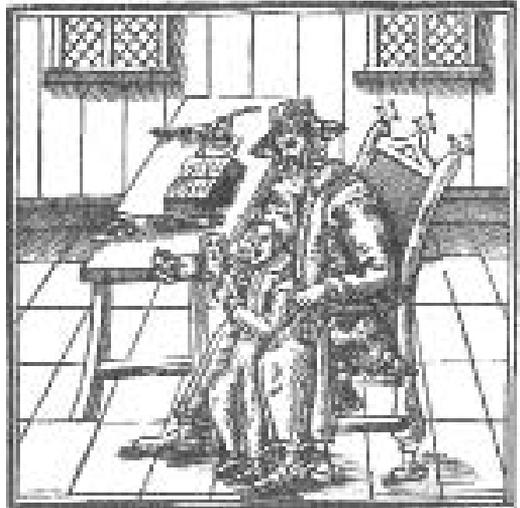
Economic difficulties—which translate into poorer schooling and other handicaps—ultimately account for a considerable share of the disadvantages found among fatherless children. By the best recent estimates, however, economic status accounts for no more than half of these disadvantages. The latest and most authoritative review of this research is *Growing Up with a Single Parent* (1994), by sociologists Sara McLanahan of Princeton University and Gary Sandefur of the University of Wisconsin. Reviewing five large-scale social surveys and other evidence (and after adjusting for many income-related factors), they concluded: “Children who grow up with only one of their biological parents (nearly always the mother) . . . are twice as likely to drop out of high school, 2.5 times as likely to become teen mothers, and 1.4 times as likely to be idle—out of school and out of work—as children who grow up with both parents.”

Such conclusions will no longer come as a surprise to many Americans. Yet it was not so long ago that the divorce revolution was given a strangely positive cast in American popular culture. If breaking up is better for parents, it was thought, it cannot be all that bad for children. What keeps parents happy should also keep children happy.

In part, this was a convenient, guilt-retarding rationalization for parents who were breaking up. But it was supported by many social scientists as well. In the 1970s, at the height of the divorce revolution, many social scientists were remarkably sanguine about the effects of fatherlessness. Typical was the work of Elizabeth Herzog and Cecelia Sudia. In a 1973 report written for the U.S. Children's Bureau entitled “Children in Fatherless Families,” they concluded from a review of existing studies that the “evidence concerning [juvenile delinquency, school achievement, and masculine identity] is neither clear enough nor firm enough to demonstrate beyond doubt whether fatherless boys are or are not overrepresented” in problem groups.

Herzog and Sudia went so far as to discount any negative effects of

divorce and fatherlessness. They claimed that discord and conflict in the home prior to a divorce are more detrimental than a father's absence after the divorce and concluded that, therefore, "one is forced to prefer a 'good' one-parent [read: fatherless] home for a child." From this sort of lesser-of-two-evils conclusion, it was but a short step in the minds of some social scientists to the view that divorce is for the best for parents and children alike.



In early New England, fathers, not mothers, were chiefly responsible for child rearing.

What do fathers do? Much of what they contribute to the growth of their children, of course, is simply the result of being a second adult in the home. Bringing up children is demanding, stressful, and often exhausting. Two adults can not only support and spell each other; they can offset each other's deficiencies and build on each other's strengths.

Beyond being merely a second adult or third party, fathers—men—bring an array of unique and irreplaceable qualities that women do not ordinarily bring. Some of these are familiar, if sometimes overlooked or taken for granted. The father as protector, for example, has by no means outlived his usefulness. His importance as a role model has become a familiar idea. Teenage boys without fathers are notoriously prone to trouble. The pathway to adulthood for daughters is somewhat easier, but they still must learn from their fathers, as they cannot from their mothers, how to relate to men. They learn from their fathers about heterosexual trust, intimacy, and difference. They learn to appreciate their own femininity from the one male who is most special in their lives (assuming that they love and respect their fathers). Most important, through loving and being loved by their fathers, they learn that they are love-worthy.

Recent research has given us much deeper—and more surprising—insights into the father's role in child rearing. It shows that in almost all of their interactions with children, fathers do things a little differently from mothers. What fathers do—their special parenting style—is not only highly complementary to what mothers do but is by all indications important in its own right for optimum child rearing.

For example, an often-overlooked dimension of fathering is play. From their children's birth through adolescence, fathers tend to emphasize play more than caretaking. This may be troubling to egalitarian feminists, and it would indeed be wise for most fathers to spend more time in caretaking. Yet the father's style of play seems to have unusual significance. It is likely to be both physically stimulating and exciting. With older children it involves more physical games and teamwork requiring the competitive testing of physical and mental skills. It frequently resembles an apprenticeship or teaching relationship: come on, let me show you how.

Mothers tend to spend more time playing with their children, but theirs is



Autumn of the patriarch: many Victorian men formed warm relationships with their children.

with their fathers . . . usually quickly learn that biting, kicking, and other forms of physical violence are not acceptable.” They learn when enough is enough and when to “shut it down.”

Children, a committee assembled by the Board on Children and Families of the National Research Council concluded, “learn critical lessons about how to recognize and deal with highly charged emotions in the context of playing with their fathers. Fathers, in effect, give children practice in regulating their own emotions and recognizing others’ emotional clues.” The findings of a study of convicted murderers in Texas are probably not the product of coincidence: 90 percent of them either did not play as children or played abnormally.

At play and in other realms, fathers tend to stress competition, challenge, initiative, risk taking, and independence. Mothers, as caretakers, stress emotional security and personal safety. On the playground, fathers will try to get the child to swing ever higher, higher than the person on the next swing, while mothers will be cautious, worrying about an accident. It’s sometimes said that fathers express more concern for the child’s longer-term development, while mothers focus on the child’s immediate well-being (which, of course, in its own way has everything to do with a child’s long-term well-being). What is clear is that children have dual needs that must be met. Becoming a mature and competent adult involves the integration of two often-contradictory human desires: for *communion*, or the feeling of being included, connected, and related, and for *agency*, which entails independence, individuality, and self-fulfillment. One without the other is a denuded and impaired humanity, an incomplete realization of human potential.

a different kind of play. Mothers’ play tends to take place more at the child’s level. Mothers provide the child with the opportunity to direct the play, to be in charge, to proceed at the child’s own pace. Kids, at least in the early years, seem to prefer to play with daddy. In one study of 2 1/2-year-olds who were given a choice, more than two-thirds chose to play with their father.

The way fathers play has effects on everything from the management of emotions to intelligence and academic achievement. It is particularly important in promoting the essential virtue of self-control.

According to one expert, “children who roughhouse

For many couples, to be sure, these functions are not rigidly divided along standard female-male lines. There may even be a role reversal in some cases, with men largely assuming the female style and women the male style. But these are exceptions that prove the rule. Gender-differentiated parenting is of such importance that in child rearing by homosexual couples, either gay or lesbian, one partner commonly fills the male-instrumental role while the other fills the female-expressive role.

It is ironic, however, that in our public discussion of fathering, it's seldom acknowledged that fathers have a distinctive role to play. Indeed, it's far more often said that fathers should be more like mothers (and that men generally should be more like women—less aggressive, less competitive). While such things may be said with the best of intentions, the effects are perverse. After all, if fathering is no different from mothering, males can easily be replaced in the home by women. It might even seem better to do so. Already viewed as a burden and obstacle to self-fulfillment, fatherhood thus comes to seem superfluous and unnecessary as well.

We know, however, that fathers—and fatherlessness—have surprising impacts on children. Fathers' involvement seems to be linked to improved quantitative and verbal skills, improved problem-solving ability, and higher academic achievement. Several studies have found that the presence of the father is one of the determinants of girls' proficiency in mathematics. And one pioneering study found that the amount of time fathers spent reading was a strong predictor of their daughters' verbal ability.

For sons, who can more directly follow their fathers' example, the results have been even more striking. A number of studies have uncovered a strong relationship between father involvement and the quantitative and mathematical abilities of their sons. Other studies have found a relationship between paternal nurturing and boys' verbal intelligence.

How fathers produce these intellectual benefits is not yet clear. No doubt it is partly a matter of the time and money a man brings to his family. But it is probably also related to the unique mental and behavioral qualities of men; the male sense of play, reasoning, challenge, and problem solving, and the traditional male association with achievement and occupational advancement.

Men also have a vital role to play in promoting cooperation and other "soft" virtues. We don't often think of fathers in connection with the teaching of empathy, but involved fathers, it turns out, may be of special importance for the development of this important character trait, essential to an ordered society of law-abiding, cooperative, and compassionate adults. Examining the results of a 26-year longitudinal study, a trio of researchers reached a "quite astonishing" conclusion: the most important childhood factor of all in developing empathy is paternal involvement in child care. Fathers who spent time alone with their children more than twice a week, giving meals, baths, and other basic care, reared the most compassionate adults.

Again, it is not yet clear why fathers are so important in instilling this quality. Perhaps merely by being with their children they provide a model for compassion. Perhaps it has to do with their style of play or mode of reasoning. Perhaps it is somehow related to the fact that fathers typically are the family's main arbiter with the outside world. Or perhaps

it is because mothers who receive help from their mates have more time and energy to cultivate the soft virtues. Whatever the reason, it is hard to think of a more important contribution that fathers can make to their children.

Fatherlessness is directly implicated in many of our most grievous social ills. Of all the negative consequences, juvenile delinquency and violence probably loom largest in the public mind. Reported violent crime has soared 550 percent since 1960, and juveniles have the fastest-growing crime rate. Arrests of juveniles for murder, for example, rose 128 percent between 1983 and 1992.

Many people intuitively believe that fatherlessness is related to delinquency and violence, and the weight of research evidence supports this belief. Having a father at home is no guarantee that a youngster won't commit a crime, but it appears to be an excellent form of prevention. Sixty percent of America's rapists, 72 percent of its adolescent murderers, and 70 percent of its long-term prison inmates come from fatherless homes. Fathers are important to their sons as role models. They are important for maintaining authority and discipline. And they are important in helping their sons to develop both self-control and feelings of empathy toward others.

Unfortunately, the die for the near future has already been cast. The teenage population is expected to grow in the next decade by as much as 20 percent—even more for minority teenagers—as the children of the baby boomers grow up. Many of these restless youngsters will come of age without fathers. Criminologist James Fox warns of “a tremendous crime wave . . . in the next 10 years” fueled by what he calls “the young and the ruthless.” In 1993, for example, there were 3,647 teenage killers; by 2005, Fox expects there will be 6,000.

The twin to the nightmare specter of too many little boys with guns is too many little girls with babies. Fatherlessness is again a major contributing factor.

During the past three decades, there has been a dramatic increase in the percentage of teenagers engaging in sexual activity. In the mid-1950s, only 27 percent of girls had sexual intercourse by age 18; in 1988, 56 percent of such girls—including fully a quarter of 15-year-olds—had become sexually active.

About one million teen pregnancies occur in the United States each year, giving this nation the highest teen pregnancy rate in the industrialized world. Twelve percent of all women aged 15 to 19 (21 percent of those who have had sexual intercourse) become pregnant each year. Fifty percent of these pregnancies end in births, 35 percent end in abortions, and about 14 percent end in miscarriages. Of all children born out of wedlock, most will grow up fatherless in single-parent households.

Again, there are many factors involved in this trend, including everything from the earlier age at which girls now reach sexual maturity to the weakening of cultural norms. Yet as important as any of these, if not more so, is fatherlessness. The research lends strong support to the common-sense proposition that fathers play a key role in the development of their daughters' sexual behavior. Analyzing data from the National Child Development Study, a major British longitudinal study that followed the lives of thousands of children born in 1958, researcher Kathleen Kiernan found that young women with divorced or separated parents are more like-



Poor but proud, a South Carolina family posed for a photograph around 1890. Black families endured despite the legacies of slavery.

ly to form unions in their teens, to have a child at an early age, and to bear children outside marriage. Kiernan highlighted one important characteristic that opens the door to other problems: girls from single-parent families are more likely to leave home at an earlier age than other girls.

The presence of a surrogate father does not help. Indeed, one of the best-established findings concerning stepfamilies is that the children—particularly girls—leave such households at an earlier age than do kids in single-parent households or in two-parent households.

On the face of it, there would seem to be at least one potentially positive side to fatherlessness: without a man around the house, the incidence of child abuse might be expected to drop. Unfortunately, quite the opposite has happened.

According to recent surveys, some 20 percent of adult women and five to 10 percent of adult men have experienced sexual abuse at some time during their childhood. Physical abuse of children is more common still, being about twice as prevalent as sexual abuse. Most evidence points to a real increase in both major forms of child abuse in recent decades.

One of the greatest risk factors in child abuse, found by virtually every investigation that has ever been conducted, is family disruption, especially living in a female-headed, single-parent household. In 1981, 43 percent of children who were reported to have been abused were living in such households.

Sexual abuse is one form of child abuse. Most of the victims (80 percent of the cases reported to child protection authorities) are girls, and most of

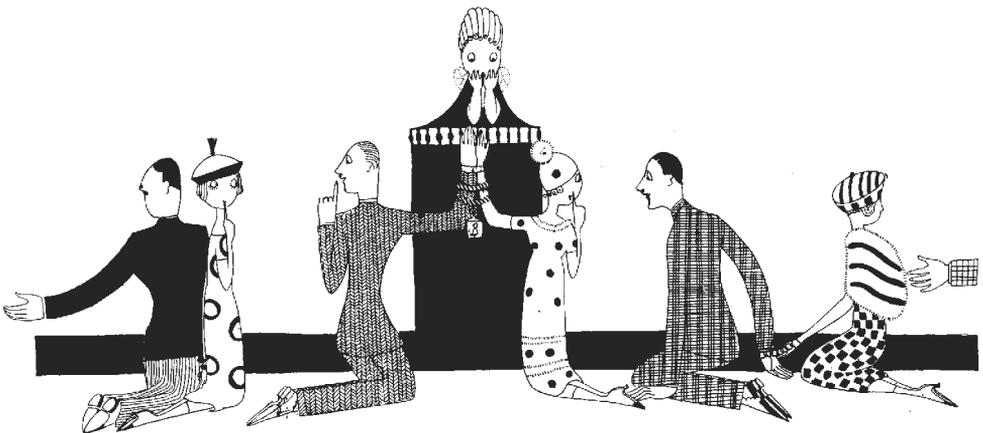
the perpetrators are men. But less than half of the offenders are family members and close relatives, and only 10 to 30 percent are strangers. The remainder are acquaintances of various kinds, including neighbors, peers, and mothers' boyfriends.

Why does living in a fatherless household pose such hazards for children? Two explanations are usually given: the children receive less supervision and protection and they are also more emotionally deprived, which leaves them vulnerable to sexual abusers, who commonly entrap children by offering affection, attention, and friendship. Fatherlessness is closely involved in both of these explanations. Even a diligent absent father can't supervise or protect his children the way a live-in father can. Nor is he likely to have the kind of relationship with his daughter that is usually needed to give her a foundation of emotional security and a model for nonsexual relationships with men.

A special problem for children living with single mothers is that these mothers rely heavily on child-care providers who are not relatives. The danger is greatest, of course, when the child-care provider is male. One study of sexual abuse in Iowa found that male sitters were responsible for almost five times as much sexual abuse as female sitters, even though they provided only a very small overall proportion of child care.

By all accounts, mothers' boyfriends are another serious problem, although we lack hard data to prove it. Certainly, such predatory men are much in the news. One often hears, for example, of men who take up with a woman solely because they desire the possibility of sexual access to her daughter, and of women who urge their boyfriends to play daddy with their children, thus providing the boyfriend with an ease of access that can lead to inappropriate behavior.

Among sexual abusers who are blood relatives, only a small fraction are fathers. The great majority are uncles, grandfathers, brothers and stepbrothers, and male cousins. When a father is the perpetrator, he is typically not the natural father but a surrogate father. In a study conducted in San Francisco of 930 adult women, for example, it was found that daughters are at least seven times more likely to be abused by their stepfathers than by their biological fathers. Approximately one out of every six women who had a stepfather as a



Divorce was already on the rise when this cartoonist satirized it in the 1920s.

principal figure in her childhood years was sexually abused by him, compared to only one out of every 40 women who had a biological father.

Some biological fathers certainly are sexually abusive toward their daughters, however, and their numbers may be increasing. Paradoxically, this too may be related to growing fatherlessness, or at least to the circumstances that surround family breakup.

Compared to abusing stepfathers, for example, biological fathers gone bad are more likely to live hardscrabble lives, with very bad marriages, alcohol and drug problems, and poverty. Abuse is also more common in single-parent families in which the father is the single parent, and such families are growing more numerous. Third, fathers who are not in the home much and are less involved in nurturing activities are more likely to abuse their children. Strong attachment and bonding between father and daughter in infancy may be a critical ingredient in preventing later child abuse, but with so many children born out of wedlock, early bonding is something that fewer natural fathers will experience.

Still, it remains something of a puzzle why a natural father would break the universal incest taboo. There is evidence from preindustrial societies that the less confident a father is that a daughter is really his offspring, the more likely he is to have an incestuous relationship with her. Societies in which fathers have low “paternity confidence,” a term used by evolutionary psychologists, tend also to be societies with a higher incidence of incestuous relationships. (“Maternity is a fact,” observed the Roman jurist Baius, “paternity is a matter of opinion.”) Alas, we don’t need a statistical test to believe that paternity confidence must be dropping in America in the wake of the sexual revolution.

One important difference between physical abuse of children and sexual abuse is somewhat surprising: women are often the abusers. Yet fatherlessness is still an important factor. A mother is much more likely to be abusive and to allow others to mistreat her child when she does not have the support of an actively involved father. Indeed, the majority of preadolescent victims of physical abuse (and especially of more severe forms of abuse) are boys, who are generally harder to control.

Probably the most serious threat to children in single-parent families is the mother’s boyfriend. In a study of physical abuse in single-mother households, education expert Leslie Margolin found that 64 percent of the nonparental abuse was committed by such men. (Nonrelatives such as day-care providers and adolescent baby-sitters were a distant second, with 15 percent, followed by relatives.)

Why this tremendous over-representation of boyfriends? One explanation is drawn from evolutionary biology. These men are unrelated to the child, notes Margolin, and a care giver’s level of protection and solicitude toward a child is directly proportional to shared genetic heritage. And, as this theory predicts, other male nonrelatives were significantly more abusive than male relatives.

The domestic threat posed by unrelated adult males reappears tragically in step-parent households, one of America’s fastest growing family forms. Many studies have found that a child is far more likely to be physically abused by a stepfather than by a natural father. One investigation, by evolutionary psychologists Margo Wilson and Martin Daly, found that preschoolers in the Canadian city of Hamilton living with one natural par-

ent and one step-parent in 1993 were 40 times more likely to become child-abuse statistics than children living with two natural parents.

Another group that has suffered in the new age of fatherlessness is, perhaps unexpectedly, women. In this new era, Gloria Steinem's oft-quoted quip that a woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle no longer seems quite so funny. There is no doubt that many women get along very well without men in their lives and that having the wrong men in their lives can be disastrous. But just as it increases assaults on children, fatherlessness appears to generate more violence against women.

Such violence, especially family or domestic violence committed by intimates, has been common throughout history. Now that women enjoy more legal protections and are less likely to marry, one might suppose that such crimes would diminish. Instead, they have increased.

Partly this is a matter of arithmetic. More than two-thirds of violence (assault, robbery, and rape) against women is committed by unrelated acquaintances or strangers. As the number of unattached males in the population goes up, so does the incidence of violence toward women.

Or consider the fact that, of the violence toward women that is committed by intimates and other relatives, only 29 percent involves a current spouse, whereas 42 percent involves a close friend or partner and another 12 percent an ex-spouse. As current spouses are replaced by nonspouses and exes, violence toward women increases.

In fact, marriage appears to be a strong safety factor for women. A satisfactory marriage between sexually faithful partners, especially when they are raising their own biological children, engenders fewer risks for violence than probably any other circumstance in which a woman could find herself. Recent surveys of violent-crime victimization have found that only 12.6 of every 1,000 married women fall victim to violence, compared with 43.9 of every 1,000 never-married women and 66.5 of every 1,000 divorced or separated women.

Men, too, suffer grievously from the growth of fatherlessness. The world over, young and unattached males have always been a cause for social concern. They can be a danger to themselves and to society. Young unattached men tend to be more aggressive, violent, promiscuous, and prone to substance abuse; they are also more likely to die prematurely through disease, accidents, or self-neglect. They make up the majority of deviants, delinquents, criminals, killers, drug users, vice lords, and miscreants of every kind. Senator Moynihan put it succinctly when he warned that a society full of unattached males "asks for and gets chaos."

Family life—marriage and child rearing—is an extremely important civilizing force for men. It encourages them to develop those habits of character, including prudence, cooperativeness, honesty, trust, and self-sacrifice, that can lead to achievement as an economic provider. Marriage also focuses male sexual energy. Having children typically impresses on men the importance of setting a good example. Who hasn't heard at least one man personally testify that he gave up certain deviant or socially irresponsible patterns of life only when he married and had children?

The civilizing effect of being a father is highlighted by a path breaking social improvement endeavor in Cleveland. In the inner-city Hough neigh-

borhood, social worker Charles Ballard has been turning around the lives of young black men through his Institute for Responsible Fatherhood and Family Revitalization. Since 1982, using an intensive social-work approach that includes home visits, parenting programs, and group therapy sessions, he has reunited more than 2,000 absent, unwed fathers with their children.

The standard theory is that if you want inner-city men like these to be responsible fathers, you first must find them a job. But Ballard has stood this theory on its head. His approach is that you first must convince the young men of the importance of being a good father, and then they will be motivated to finish school and find work.

An independent evaluation of his approach showed that it really works. Only 12 percent of the young men had full-time work when they entered his program, but 62 percent later found such work, and another 12 percent found part-time jobs. Ninety-seven percent of the men he dealt with began providing financial support for their children, and 71 percent had no additional children out of wedlock.

Marriage by itself, even without the presence of children, is also a major civilizing force for men. No other institution save religion (and perhaps the military) places such moral demands on men. To be sure, there is a selection factor in marriage. Those men whom women would care to marry already have some of the civilized virtues. And those men who are morally beyond the pale have difficulty finding mates. Yet epidemiological studies and social surveys have shown that marriage has a civilizing effect independent of the selection factor. Marriage actually promotes health, competence, virtue, and personal well-being. With the continued growth of fatherlessness, we can expect to see a nation of men who are at worst morally out of control and at best unhappy, unhealthy, and unfulfilled.

Just as cultural forms can be discarded, dismantled, and declared obsolete, so can they be reinvented. In order to restore marriage and reinstate fathers in the lives of their children, we are somehow going to have to undo the cultural shift of the last few decades toward radical individualism. We are going to have to re-embrace some cultural propositions or understandings that throughout history have been universally accepted but which today are unpopular, if not rejected outright.

Marriage must be re-established as a strong social institution. The father's role must also be redefined in a way that neglects neither historical models nor the unique attributes of modern societies, the new roles for women, and the special qualities that men bring to child rearing.

Such changes are by no means impossible. Witness the transformations



Father Knows Best—but the stereotypical 1950s dad was more democrat than autocrat.

wrought by the civil rights, women's, and environmental movements, and even the campaigns to reduce smoking and drunk driving. What is necessary is for large numbers of adults, and especially our cultural and intellectual leaders, to agree on the importance of change.

There are many practical steps that can be taken.* Employers, for example, can reduce the practice of uprooting and relocating married couples with children, provide generous parental leave, and experiment with more flexible forms of work. Religious leaders can reclaim moral ground from the culture of divorce and nonmarriage, resisting the temptation to equate things such as "committed relationships" with marriage. Marriage counselors, family therapists, and family-life educators can begin with a bias in favor of marriage, stressing the needs of the marriage at least as much as the needs of the client. As for the entertainment industry, pressure already is being brought to bear to curtail the glamourization of unwed motherhood, marital infidelity, alternative lifestyles, and sexual promiscuity.

What about divorce? Current laws send the message that marriage is not a socially important relationship that involves a legally binding commitment. We should consider a two-tier system of divorce law: marriages without minor children would be relatively easy to dissolve, but marriages with such children would be dissolvable only by mutual agreement or on grounds that clearly involve a wrong by one party against the other, such as desertion or physical abuse. Longer waiting periods for divorcing couples with children might also be called for, combined with some form of mandatory marriage counseling or marital education.

Because the causes of the decline of marriage and fatherhood lie mainly in the moral, behavioral, and even spiritual realms, the decline is mostly resistant to public-policy and government cures. All of the western industrialized societies, regardless of governmental system and political persuasion, have been beset by the decline of family. The decline of marriage is almost as great in Sweden, with the West's most ambitious welfare state, as it is in the United States, the most *laissez-faire* of the industrialized nations.

Nevertheless, government policies do have some impact. While the statistical relationship of economic cycles to marriage and divorce is not particularly strong, for example, low wages, unemployment, and poverty have never been friendly to marriage. Government can do something about that. It can also remedy the decline in the value of the income tax exemption for dependent children and erase the tax code's "marriage penalty." As a society, moreover, we have decided, through a variety of government programs, to socialize much of the cost of growing old, but less of the cost of raising children. At the very least, we should strive for generational equity. But more than anything else, parents need time to be with their children, the kind of time that would be afforded by a more generous family leave policy.

We also should consider providing educational credits or vouchers to parents who leave the paid labor force to raise their young children. These parents are performing an important social service at the risk of damaging their long-run career prospects. Education subsidies, like those in the GI Bill of Rights, would reward parents by helping them resume their careers.

*The suggestions that follow are drawn from *Marriage in America: A Report to the Nation* (1995), a publication of the Council on Families in America, a national nonpartisan group of scholars and family experts of which I am cochairman.

Government policies should be designed to favor married, child rearing couples. Some critics argue that the federal government should not involve itself in sensitive moral issues or risk stigmatizing alternative lifestyles. But recognizing such alternatives does not require treating them as equivalent to marriage. The government, moreover, regularly takes moral positions on a whole range of issues, such as the rights of women, income equality, and race relations. A position on the need for children to have two committed parents, a father and a mother, during their formative years is hardly a radical departure.



The new ideal dad

Today in America the social order is fraying badly. We seem, despite notable accomplishments in some areas, to be on a path of decline. The past three decades have seen steeply rising rates of crime, declining political and interpersonal trust, growing personal and corporate greed, deteriorating communities, and increasing confusion over moral issues. For most Americans, life has become more anxious, unsettled, and insecure.

In large part, this represents a failure of social values. People can no longer be counted on to conduct themselves according to the virtues of honesty, self-sacrifice, and personal responsibility. In our ever-growing pursuit of the self—self-expression, self-development, self-actualization, and self-fulfillment—we seem to have slipped off many of our larger social obligations.

At the heart of our discontent lies an erosion of personal relationships. People no longer trust others as they once did; they no longer feel the same sense of commitment and obligation to others. In part, this may be an unavoidable product of the modern condition. But it has gone much deeper than that. Some children across America now go to bed each night worrying about whether their father will be there the next morning. Some wonder whatever happened to their father. And some wonder who he is. What are these children learning at this most basic of all levels about honesty, self-sacrifice, personal responsibility, and trust?

What the decline of fatherhood and marriage in America really means, then, is that slowly, insidiously, and relentlessly our society has been moving in an ominous direction. If we are to make progress toward a more just and humane society, we must reverse the tide that is pulling fathers apart from their families. Nothing is more important for our children or for our future as a nation.