

Fighting the Fatherlessness Epidemic

By Brigette Settles Scott, MA and Jody Vilschick
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“**I**nvolve-ment of a responsible male—be it custodial or non-custodial, biological or not—can significantly affect the health outcomes of young children,” said Dwaine Simms, replication manager, Minnesota Early Learning Design (MELD) for Young Dads, in Minneapolis, MN. “Even before the child is born, a father can affect the health status of his child—from encouraging mom to eat properly and attending prenatal appointments to advocating for early preventative care after birth.”

Yet, today, more than 22 million children live in homes away from their fathers—up from fewer than 8 million in 1960—according to the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI), a nonprofit, non-governmental organization that works to counter the growing problem of fatherlessness by stimulating a broad-based social movement to restore responsible fatherhood as a national priority.

“There’s an epidemic of father absence in American society,” declares Edward E. Bartlett, Ph.D., senior policy advisor and founder of Men’s Health America. “In some communities, a large number—even a majority—of children are growing up without meaningful contact with their father.” This lack of contact can significantly impact the overall health status of children.

“Tonight nearly four out of ten children in America will go to sleep in a home in which their father does not live. While at times, it is easy to throw around statistics such as these to make a point, the plain truth of the matter is that for every frightening statistic, there is a frail human life attached to it,” says Wade F. Horn, Ph.D., former president of NFI, and currently the assistant secretary at the Administration for Children and Families.

Children who grow up in single-parent households, are also at great risk of not having health care coverage. According to the June 2000, Medical Child Support Working Group Report, children living in one parent households (largely fatherless) have substantially less access to health care services, including preventive care that ensures childhood immunizations, vision and hearing screening, and dental care. Health care services are also far more likely to be delayed due to cost.

The MELD for Young Dads program is one local effort to address the unique needs of young fathers. The program reaches out to both custodial and non-custodial fathers, typically between 15 and 25 years old, and aims to prevent paternal neglect by helping young fathers handle the societal and interpersonal problems that can be barriers to involvement with their children.

“A major component of our curriculum is to bring information to fathers which will allow them to make informed decisions about how to support the health care of their children,” added Simms.



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Research shows that children benefit from positive relationships not only with their mothers, but also with their fathers:

- Father involvement is important even for very young children. Good fathering during infancy and early childhood contributes to the development of emotional security, curiosity, and math and verbal skills.
- Higher levels of involvement by fathers in activities with their children, such as eating meals together, going to the park or other outings, and helping with homework, are associated with fewer behavior problems, higher levels of sociability, and a higher level of school performance among children and adolescents.
- Involvement by fathers in children’s schooling, such as volunteering at school and attending school meetings, parent-teacher conferences and class events, is associated with higher grades, greater school enjoyment, and lower chances of suspension or expulsion from school.
- The father-child relationship affects daughters as well as sons. Girls who live with both their mother and father do better academically. In addition, they are less likely to engage in early sexual involvement and alcohol or drug use.
- Although negative peer influence is the major reason kids use drugs, research suggests that positive family influence is the main reason kids don’t use drugs. Both boys and girls have reduced risk of drug and alcohol use if their fathers are involved in their lives.

Promoting Responsible Fatherhood

Also responding to the critical problem of “fatherlessness” in the nation, The Institute for Responsible Fatherhood & Family Revitalization (IRFFR), headquartered in Washington, D.C., has created a program designed to bring young African American fathers back to their children and families. The program hinges on the theory that the life of the father has tremendous impact on the lives of both his children and their mother. The fathers receive intense, non-traditional, one-on-one support, group support, family outreach, fathering skills, health and nutrition information, medical and housing referrals, and education and career guidance.

“Our goal is to create good, loving, compassionate, and secure fathers,” said Charles Ballard, founder and chief executive officer, IRFFR. The Institute’s approach is to teach fathers to be good models for his children. “Children learn from us first—not their friends. We, as husbands and fathers, have major responsibilities that we must carry out in order to have good healthy families.”

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We teach our fathers that in order to create longevity among our people we must do three things: 1) change our life style from at-risk to risk-free, 2) we must eat better and practice proper nutrition habits, and 3) we must exercise. In turn, he becomes the model of good health that is then passed on to his children," added Ballard.

The program hinges on seven primary approaches to creating responsible fathers:

- Enhance intrapersonal development—mental health;
- Enhance health and wellness—be good models of good health for the family;
- Enhance family development—creating a healthier family model;
- Enhance educational development—e.g., completion of GED, high school, college;
- Enhance financial development—e.g., savings, investments;
- Enhance entrepreneurship—e.g., employment, enterprise; and
- Enhance community development—strive to become pillars in the community.

To date, IRFFR has reached over 7,000 fathers nationwide since 1982, and can claim over a 90 percent success rate in some cities.

Government Support

While government cannot make good fathers, it can, and does, support efforts to help men become the best fathers they can be. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is promoting responsible fatherhood by funding programs whose goal is to improve work opportunities for low-income fathers, increase child support collections, enhance parenting skills, and support access and visitation by non-custodial parents. One of HHS' programs—Responsible Fatherhood Management Information System (RFMIS)—is a computer database program that supports the information-management efforts of programs serving fathers through its ready-made evaluation tool. Specifically for community-based organizations serving men and fathers, RFMIS is currently being used by 15 HHS fatherhood project sites across the country and in eight fatherhood projects funded by the Sisters of Charity Foundation of South Carolina.

According to Linda Mellgren, social science analyst, in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, RFMIS was created because after a review of existing fatherhood programs, one of the primary areas identified as needing improvement was to have better tools for assessing and tracking their client caseload. "The RFMIS has allowed projects running on very tight budgets to have access to a sophisticated management tool that can be adapted to meet their program's needs," she says.

"It's helped us provide the services really needed to allow individuals to become more responsible fathers," says Stan McLearn, director of the Father Friendly Initiative of the Boston Public Health Commission. The Father

Friendly Initiative serves about 130 men at any given time. "Our clients need services of varying levels of intensity—some just need a job or help getting a GED. Others need counseling and mental health services, or substance abuse treatment."

McLearn especially appreciates how RFMIS allows him to focus on providing the services a father needs most. "In one case, the father was caught up in a 'he-said, she-said' situation involving him, his child's mother, his girlfriend, and her boyfriend," says McLearn. "Now he has an excellent relationship with his child's mother and he's getting married to his girlfriend—and his child's mother is invited to the wedding. Another father, through counseling and anger management courses, was able to establish a good relationship with his child's mother, and as a result, ended up marrying her."

The RFMIS makes it possible for programs to identify who they are serving, what needs they have, and what services are being delivered. This allows programs to monitor their activities on an on-going basis, and to make changes when they are not meeting clients needs. Irene Luckey, director of programs for the Fatherhood Initiative of the University of South Carolina's Institute on Families and Society, which works closely with the Sisters of Charity Foundation in South Carolina, is enthusiastic about RFMIS' ability to help them track trends. "When we started we expected that finding jobs for the men would be the main issue," she said. "We learned from the data that due to their educational level and other factors, they are working, but below the minimum wage. We also saw that a lot of the men don't have long work histories—they may stay at a job for two years or less. So we've had to focus on not just getting a job, but getting and keeping a sustainable job." The 16 Sisters of Charity projects serve more than 500 men throughout South Carolina.

As good as RFMIS is now, there are some changes in the works, according to Mellgren. "A client outcomes section is being developed that will contain a broad set of outcomes data relevant to the fatherhood field, that projects can adapt to their own service model," she says.

All this is good news for fathers and their children everywhere. Having a father involved in children's lives also adds non-quantifiable emotional well-being and richness. "As fathers, we will have opportunities to make either the blooper reel or the highlight film. Through continuous, meaningful contact with our children, we will create lasting memories," writes Jack Petrash, in the Spring 2001 issue of *Fatherhood Today*, an NFI publication.

For more information on the fatherhood programs mentioned, go to the Department of Health and Human Services Fatherhood Initiative web site at <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/>

For more information on the Guidebook to the Responsible Fatherhood Project Participant Management Information System (RFMIS), go to <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/guidebook99/index.htm>

For more information on the MELD Program, go to <http://www.meld.org>

