

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The Importance of Fathers

In a recent article in *The Atlantic*, Matt Gross and Theodore Ross offer a poignant description of a typical dad on a television commercial: “The hapless, bumbling father is a stock character in product marketing. He makes breakfast for dinner and is incapable of handling, or sometimes even noticing, a soggy diaper. He tries desperately to hide the crumb-strewn, dirt-streaked evidence of poor parenting before the mother gets home . . . [Dad] is incompetent at managing a household as his wife was hyper-efficient. In sitcoms, and in the commercials that aired during sitcoms, Dad was a comic relief; everyone knew that power in the home (economic power, especially) resided with Mom.” Although this picture of dad is finally changing, it still appears with almost monotonous regularity on television. This is the new normal for families that are two parent families: Dad is a bumbling, somewhat idiotic figure, while mom is the key person in the family—efficient, focused, with an I-can-have-it-all attitude. Mom is the new hero; dad is almost irrelevant. Indeed, as a recent article published by the Institute for Family Studies demonstrates, “The irrelevancy of fathers had become an article of faith among researchers, and why would any of them question something they *knew* to be true? But then researchers started challenging that assumption and studying fathers’ roles in greater detail. To sum up their conclusions, we now know that fathers are vastly important in their children’s lives, in ways that both scholars and parenting experts have overlooked.”

The importance of fathers to their children is more vital today because there is a genuine crisis of fatherhood in America. Consider these facts cited by Stephen Marche: “The number of American families without fathers has grown from 10.3% in 1970 to 24.6% in 2013; that percentage has more or less been stable over the past few years, at about a quarter of all families, with 17.5 million children fatherless in the United States . . . American fatherlessness is a national disaster and, according to the latest research into its effects, more of a disaster than anybody could have imagined.” Reflect on this summary of a significant body of research that Marche mentions:

- Fatherlessness significantly affects suicide, incarceration risk, and mental health of children. The new fatherhood is not merely a lifestyle question. Fathers spending time with their children results in a better, healthier, more educated, more stable, less criminal world. Exposure to fathers is a public good. Fathers are vital to the well-being of children.
- Florida senator Marco Rubio argues that the family must be at the center of economic policy for the US: “The truth is the greatest tool to lift children and families from poverty is one that decreases the probability of child poverty by 82%. But it isn’t a government spending program. It’s called marriage.”

- American culture is increasingly redefining the image and perception of what it means to be a man. Marche writes perceptively: “What happens when the category of ‘man’ is synonymous with the category of ‘uneducated,’ which is synonymous with the category of ‘failure’?” As I have mentioned several times over the last two years on *Issues in Perspective*, Christina Hoff Sommers has charted the development of this perception of men in American society: The diagnosis rate for ADHD is as high as 15.1% for American boys, a percentage more than two times for girls. Boys are expelled from preschool nearly five times as often as girls. In elementary and secondary school, boys get D’s and F’s at more than three times the rate of girls. On twelfth-grade standardized tests, 28% of boys score below basic levels in writing (it’s 14% for girls), and 31% of boys are below basic levels in reading (it’s 20% for girls). The gap in the high-school dropout rates persists even as the general rate of dropouts declines. Across grades four, eight, and twelve, boys write at lower levels than girls. Boys’ juvenile-arrest rate is more than two times what it is for girls. Boys are 71% of juvenile offenders. Boys are twice as likely to be threatened with a weapon in high school. Maturity and despair go together for boys. Between ages ten and fourteen, boys are about twice as likely to kill themselves. Between fifteen and nineteen, they are almost four times as likely. From twenty-four, almost five times. Women account for 56.5% of all undergrad enrollments. And women account for nearly 60% of bachelor’s and master’s degrees.”
- In American culture, father figures have been torn down. There are few good role models in our culture of what it means to be a man or what it means to be a father. Men have abused their roles and Hollywood has fueled this self-destructing image by depicting men and fathers as selfish, self-centered bullies and abusers. In addition, the sexual revolution of the last fifty years has fostered the perception of sexuality as self-indulgence and pleasure. Children are not the consequence of sex, but an aside. Therefore, men pursue women for sex, and, if a child happens to be a consequence of sex, men often assume no responsibility for the child. Hence, the significant growth of single-parent families.
- The Institute for Family Studies adds that “Children whose fathers played with them, read to them, took them on outings, [tend to have] fewer behavioral problems in the early school years, and [there is] less likelihood of delinquency or criminal behavior of adolescents. Among disadvantaged children born prematurely, those with engaged fathers had higher IQs at age three than those children whose fathers had not been playing with them or helping to care for them. Children with involved fathers were less likely to smoke as teenagers. And here was a particularly stunning result: fathers reading to seven-year old girls and asking sixteen-year old girls about school helped prevent depression and other psychological ailments in the kids decades later.” Finally, much of the evidence linking fathers to their children’s social competence comes back to the way they play with their children.

All of these studies that I have summarized in this *Perspective* simply support what Scripture has taught for over 3,000 years: God created the family and defined clearly the respective roles for both the father and the mother. Our society needs a refresher course on Genesis 2, Ephesians 5 and Colossians 3. These central passages define the role responsibilities of the mother and the

father and articulate the principles associated with God-centered parenting. A husband and a wife, who become a dad and a mom, are to serve complementary roles in their relationship with one another and in their parenting responsibilities. But permeating God's Word is the clear proposition that God gives the husband and the father the primary responsibility for leadership in the family. If that leadership responsibility, including spiritual leadership of the home, falters, the evidence in this *Perspective* demonstrates that the children suffer. So, we reach a conclusion that we often reach on *Issues in Perspective*: The breakdown of the family structure is not primarily a political or economic problem; it is a spiritual problem. Thus, the solution is not a political or economic solution; it is a spiritual solution. May God give America the grace it needs to reach this conclusion. If we do not, it is difficult to be optimistic about the future of our children.

See Matt Gross and Theodore Ross in "Dads Aren't Bumbling Idiots. . ." in www.theatlantic.com (27 March 2014); Stephen Marche, "Manifesto of the New Fatherhood," www.esquire.com (16 June 2014); "Do Fathers Matter?" at www.family-studies.org (18 June 2014).