

How Marriage Makes Men Better Fathers

by Alysse ElHage | @AlysseElHage | June 19, 2015 8:30 am

I have an amazing father, but I spent the majority of my life missing him. After my parents divorced when I was two, he went from being a full-time dad to a visitor, leaving me with bits and pieces of his time, attention, and support. Our relationship was characterized by weekend visits, phone calls, and child support payments, and, at times, it was negatively influenced by my parents' romantic partners. Our limited time together, which I shared with his new family, never felt like enough for either one of us. At one point when I was still young, he became so frustrated over his inability to be the father I deserved that he briefly considered walking away from my life. Thankfully, he changed his mind, but over the years, our relationship suffered from too much distance and not enough time together.

Although I have never asked him, my father would probably agree with Philadelphia columnist and best-selling author Solomon Jones, who recently[1] described his experience with non-custodial fatherhood as a “disjointed tapestry of love and distance, longing and hurt.” Jones, who has a daughter from his first marriage, explained that a dad living away from his child “can be reduced to little more than a voice on a phone, a playmate on a weekend or a name on a check.” Living apart from his first child, he continued, “was painful because a father’s love is so often expressed through providing and protecting. And it’s difficult to provide and protect without presence.” Expanding on this theme in a subsequent column, Jones wrote[2] that “fatherhood works best when it is paired with motherhood and sealed by marriage.”

A survey by the National Fatherhood Initiative[3] found that 81 percent of dads agreed that, “men generally perform better as fathers if they are married to the mothers of their children.” Furthermore, men who did not live with their “focal child” (the one the survey asked about) were more likely than those who did to say that “they did not spend enough time with that child and that they did not feel very close to that child.”

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So, what is it about marriage that makes it easier for men to be good fathers? David Blankenhorn, founder and president of the Institute for American Values, once explained the connection between fatherhood and marriage by noting[4] that historically, “nurturant fatherhood has rested securely on two foundations: co-residency with children and a parental alliance with their mother.” Both are more likely to occur inside of marriage than outside of it.

A Father’s Presence

A man’s physical proximity to his children and their mother has long been linked to positive father involvement. On average, dads who do not live with their kids are less involved in their lives and have poorer relationships with them than resident fathers. A 2013 CDC report[5] found that dads who lived with their children were significantly more likely to eat meals, play with, and read to their children regularly than non-resident fathers.

The link between a father’s presence and better fathering may have something to do with how fatherhood physically transforms men. New research[6] from the University of Michigan finds that fathers undergo physical changes even before their child is born, with new fathers experiencing drops in testosterone levels during their partners’ pregnancy. “Men who showed larger declines in testosterone reported less hostile behavior with their infant, and their partners reported that they helped around the house more often,” said psychology professor Robin Edelstein.

Other studies have found that men may experience increases in the hormone prolactin before birth, and increases in the stress hormone cortisol after birth. However, as Family Studies contributor David Lapp noted[7] in a summary of the 2014 report *Mother Bodies, Father Bodies*, “these changes seem to be dependent on the father’s

contact with the mother and children.” Lapp explains that in one study, “men’s hormonal levels were linked with their partner’s hormonal levels. Moreover, fathers who have more experience with babies have lower testosterone levels and higher prolactin levels than first-time fathers.”

While both married and cohabiting fathers can experience these hormonal changes and tend to be more involved with their kids than non-resident fathers, married parenthood is more likely to produce engaged fathers over the long haul. That is because cohabiting parenthood is not equal[8] to married parenthood when it comes to child well-being.

‘Marriage per se confers advantage in terms of father involvement . . .’

One study[9] by researchers at the University of Maryland and the University of Oklahoma concluded that “marriage per se confers advantage in terms of father involvement above and beyond the characteristics of the fathers themselves, whereas biology does not.” According[10] to University of Maryland professor Sandra Hofferth, the study found that “cohabiting partners, even if they are biological father to the child, do not invest the same amount of time with children as married biological fathers, and they are less warm than the married biological fathers.”

Cohabiting relationships are also less secure than married relationships. One study[11] found that children born to cohabiting parents in their twenties are three times more likely to experience parental breakup than the children of married parents. The large-scale Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, meanwhile, found[12] that “father involvement drops sharply after relationships between unmarried parents end.”

Mother Power

Good fathering is also linked to the quality of a man’s relationship with the mother of his children. Researchers have dubbed this the “package deal”[13] of fathering, where a man’s relationship status with his child’s mother predicts his level of involvement in that child’s life. “Fathers tend to parent in triads with mothers,” notes the *Mother Bodies, Father Bodies*[14] report. “Especially with their young children, fathers defer to mothers, look to them for permission and guidance, and are more apt to exit the lives of their children when the primary relationship with the mother ends.”

Mothers naturally exert a powerful influence over the father-child relationship that can either negatively or positively impact father involvement. This “maternal gate-keeping,” as it is known, is defined[15] by Melissa Steward, Vice President of the National Fatherhood Initiative, as “a mother’s protective beliefs about the desirability of a father’s involvement in their child’s life, and the behaviors acted upon that either facilitate or hinder collaborative childrearing by both parents.”

As the primary caregiver in most couples, a mother can interfere in a father’s relationship with his kids in a number of ways, including by showing a lack of respect for his role as a father, being overly critical of him in front of the kids, not allowing him to be involved in certain aspects of child care, or, in the case of divorce or a break-up, not allowing him to see the child or making it harder for him to do so.

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So what does marriage have to do with maternal gatekeeping? When a man is married to his children’s mother and has a good relationship with her, he is more likely to have the encouragement he needs to be an involved father. For example, a 2008 study[16] found that “the combination of a supportive coparenting relationship and an encouraging partner is one in which involved, competent fathering behavior is likely.”

While gatekeeping can occur in married and unmarried unions, mothers are more likely to engage in gatekeeping behaviors with nonresident fathers than with resident fathers, according to a 2003 study[17] by Temple University researchers. Of course, maternal gatekeeping could be partially influenced by selection effects. Women may choose to marry men they view as more likely to be good fathers, leading them to engage

in less gatekeeping with their children, while women tend to reject marriage with less stable men (even if they have had children together), and then engage in more gatekeeping, which discourages involved fathering.

In short, men are typically more involved and engaged fathers if they are married to the mother of their children. With about one-third of children[18] today growing up in father-absent homes, it is more important than ever that we acknowledge the proven link between healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood. Not only do fathers matter to child well-being but marriage matters to fatherhood.

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Endnotes:

1. recently: http://articles.philly.com/2015-04-29/entertainment/61620688_1_child-support-parent-and-child-married-father
2. wrote: http://articles.philly.com/2015-05-06/entertainment/61837389_1_fathers-places-children
3. National Fatherhood Initiative: <http://www.fatherhood.org/pops-culture-survey>
4. noting: <http://www.amazon.com/The-Fatherhood-Movement-Call-Action/dp/073910022X>
5. 2013 CDC report: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr071.pdf>
6. research: <http://research.umich.edu/father-knows-best>
7. noted: <http://www.americanvalues.org/magazine/fathers-are-hardwired-to-connect-but-more-are-disconnected-from-families/#.VX4ZbUt6dFJ>
8. equal: <http://family-studies.org/for-kids-parental-cohabitation-and-marriage-are-not-interchangeable/>
9. study: http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/A/Kermyt.G.Anderson-1/papers/Hofferth_Anderson_JMF2003.pdf
10. According: http://faculty-staff.ou.edu/A/Kermyt.G.Anderson-1/press/FATHERS_UMD.htm
11. study: <http://twentysomethingmarriage.org/in-brief/>
12. found: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3000012/>
13. “package deal”: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3000012/>
14. *Mother Bodies, Father Bodies*: <http://www.americanvalues.org/search/item.php?id=2508>
15. defined: <http://www.fatherhood.org/fatherhood/whats-mom-got-to-do-with-it>
16. study: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/18540767>
17. study: <http://jfi.sagepub.com/content/24/8/1020.abstract>
18. one-third of children: <http://www.fatherhood.org/father-absence-statistics>

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