



# Fatherhood in Social Context

*By James Garbarino, PhD*

The legendary anthropologist Margaret Mead once wrote, “Motherhood is a biological necessity, but fatherhood is a social invention.” That is a good place to start a discussion of the social context of fatherhood. When we look across time and cultures, we can see that parenthood for women is tied to their essential biological role in the process of bringing children into the world and, in most situations, caring for them in the early years of life; but the role of the father is intrinsically ambiguous and relies upon cultural prescription for its social significance.

## **A SOCIAL INVENTION**

Even in our fractured modern society, a woman who gives birth knows that she is the mother of “her” child. Unlike motherhood, paternity is always in doubt, and belief in one’s paternity is always an act of faith based in a particular relationship and person. It is also faith in the strength and validity of

a set of social conventions designed to structure the roles of men and women. Thus, fatherhood is essentially a social invention with diverse forms. Social science documents that some cultures have all but done away with fatherhood as a social role linked to biological relationship. Others have found ways to bond men to their children closely and intimately.

All this may seem abstract and theoretical, but it does provide an important starting point for looking at contemporary issues of fatherhood in the context of American society today. Once a child is conceived, it is a biological given that it will dominate a woman’s life for the better part of a year. The child’s continued existence depends upon the nourishment and care it receives from its mother (or some other woman) in her arms and at her breast. Even in “modern” societies, a script exists for women to follow,

should she choose to do so – a script of unconditional nurture, commitment, and love.

On the other hand, the meaning of fatherhood has been quite different. Fathers play their role in the moment of conception, to be sure (although even this is being

made optional by modern technology), but it is only a brief,

albeit dramatic, biological contribution of genetic material to get the process of child development started.

Sociobiologists even argue that what makes “sense” from an evolutionary standpoint is for men to maximize their opportunities for paternity by impregnating as many women as possible, since their investment and the costs to them of each child “fathered” are small relative to that of women, who can only give birth to a relatively small number of children.

This has two important implications for understanding the contemporary social context of fatherhood.

First, it means that there is traditionally a kind of tug-of-war between the sociobiology of fatherhood (with its imperative to impregnate as many women as possible to generate as much genetic “success” as possible)

and the cultural norms and social structures established to bind men to their children (so that the women who bear them can count on support in raising those children). But the modern social context has changed the terms of this contest for women who can support children on their own (and

thus don’t need men) and for men who cannot support children and/or are freed

from the cultural norms and social structures that ordinarily bind them to the mothers of their children. The result is a lot of children growing up without live-in fathers and, in many cases, with fathers who are totally absent. Father absence is a fact of life for about a third of American children (about 25 million of the 75 million kids in the United States). This issue is a portal to understanding fatherhood in social context in America.

### **FATHERHOOD AND IQ**

To enter this portal we need a perspective on human development that begins with the realization that there are few hard and fast simple rules about how human beings develop; complexity is the rule rather than the exception. Rarely, if ever, is there a simple cause-effect relationship that works the same way with all people in

every situation. Rather, we find that the process of cause and effect depends upon the child as a set of biological and psychological systems set within the various social, cultural, political, and economic systems that constitute the context in which developmental phenomena are occurring.

This insight is the essence of an “ecological perspective” on human development as articulated by scholars such as Urie Bronfenbrenner. It is captured in the answer to the question, “Does X cause Y?” because the best scientific answer is almost always, “It depends.” It depends upon all the constituent elements of child and context.

How does this matter? It matters in the context of what else is going on in a child’s life, because one important corollary of our ecological perspective is the fact that generally it is the accumulation of risks and assets in a child’s life that tells the story about developmental progress, not the presence or absence of any one negative or positive influence. Father absence is no exception. For example, Arnold Sameroff’s classic study of threats to child development included

eight risk factors, of which father absence was one (the others are both parental characteristics, educational level, mental health status, substance abuse and family characteristics, economic status, race, maltreatment, and number of children).

The results indicated that the average IQ scores of children were *not* jeopardized by the presence of one or two risk factors. Since research indicates that what matters for resilience is that children reach an “average” level of cognitive competence (about 100), it is highly significant that children with zero,

one or two risk factors averaged IQ scores of 119, 116 and 113, respectively. But IQ scores declined significantly into the dangerous

range with the presence of four or more (averaging 90 with four risk factors and 85 with five). In Sameroff’s research, each risk factor weighed equally in the effect; it was the accumulation of risk factors that accounted for the differences. Thus, if we ask, “What is the impact of father absence on development of basic intellectual competence?” the answer is, “It depends.”

*“...one important corollary of our ecological perspective is the fact that generally it is the accumulation of risks and assets in a child’s life that tells the story about developmental progress...”*

If father absence is the only risk factor, then the average child will still be doing well (an average IQ of 116). But if the child is already facing three other risk factors (for example, being poor, dealing with the impact of racism, and dealing with a mother with low educational attainment or mental health problems or substance abuse or any other risk factor), the average child will exhibit below-average intellectual competence (the average IQ with four risk factors is 93) and thus at risk for academic difficulties and reduced resilience. Sameroff and his colleagues report the same pattern when it comes to social and psychological problems. Of course, there may be effects of father absence beyond its effect on intellectual development, most notably in its effects of the child's accumulation of "developmental assets."

Standing against the accumulation of risk are the number of developmental assets in a child's life. Research conducted by the Search Institute has identified 40 developmental assets – positive characteristics of family, school, neighborhood, peers, culture, and belief systems. As these assets

accumulate, the likelihood that a child or adolescent will be engaged in negative outcomes such as substance abuse, early onset of sexual activity, and antisocial violence declines (in the case of violence, from 61% for kids with 0-10 assets to 6% for kids with 31-40 assets). Conversely, as the number of assets increases, so does the likelihood of positive outcomes such as success in school, good health habits, valuing diversity, and delay of gratification.

### **SOCIAL TOXICITY**

Asset accumulation predicts resilient response to stress and challenge, and this is particularly important in

modern America, where there are so many "social toxins" that can bring kids down. Social toxicity refers to the

extent to which the social environment of children and youth is poisonous in the sense that it contains serious threats to the development of identity, competence, moral reasoning, trust, hope, and the other features of personality and ideology that make for success in school, family, work, and the community. As with physical toxicity, social toxins can be fatal – in the forms of suicide, homicide,

*"As with physical toxicity, social toxins can be fatal – in the forms of suicide, homicide, and drug-related and other lifestyle-related preventable deaths."*

and drug-related and other lifestyle-related preventable deaths. But mostly it results in diminished “humanity” in the lives of children and youth by virtue of leading them to live in a state of degradation, whether they know it or not.

*“We can see social toxicity in the values, practices, and institutions that breed feelings of fear about the world...”*

What are the social and cultural poisons that are psychologically equivalent to lead and smoke in the air, PCBs in the water, and pesticides in the food chain? We can see social toxicity in the values, practices, and institutions that breed feelings of fear about the world, feelings of rejection by adults inside and outside the family, exposure to traumatic images and experiences, absence of adult supervision, and inadequate exposure to positive adult role models. These feelings and experiences arise from being embedded in a shallow materialist culture, being surrounded with negative and degrading media messages, and being deprived of relationships with sources of character in the school, the neighborhood, and the larger community.

All of these social toxins provide an important influence on the social

context of fatherhood and/or heighten the importance of fathers who are present and actively engaged in the lives of children. They undermine fathering (for example, the pop culture that glorifies fathers who are absent from the lives of their children and poisons the consciousness of boys and young men). They increase the need for strong, effective parenting to build resistance to negative influences in the life experience of children and youth, resistance that is enhanced by stable families including present and engaged fathers.

The presence vs. absence, the involvement vs. disengagement of fathers, can play a role in each of these assets. This is one way to interpret the many studies that link father absence and disengagement to lower levels of “social capital.”

### **“WRESTLING WITH YOUR FATHER”**

What are the mechanisms that link father absence to accumulation of risk factors and decline in developmental asset accumulation? There are no doubt many such links. We can identify two that speak to the social context of fatherhood. One has been

identified with respect to aggression and violence by psychologist Richard Tremblay. Tremblay's research documents that aggression is virtually universal among males and females in infancy. Most children learn to manage, control, and channel their innate aggression in socially acceptable and culturally prescribed ways. He identifies "wrestling with your father" as one of the important mechanisms in learning how to do this. Little boys (and increasingly to some extent little girls) learn "the ropes" of aggression through wrestling with their fathers. This finding may be an important explanation for the oft-repeated finding that fatherless boys have disproportionate problems with managing aggression and violence.

*"Most children learn to manage, control, and channel their innate aggression in socially acceptable and culturally prescribed ways."*

A second example concerns the role of fathers in risk and asset accumulation for children. While in Sameroff's study each of the eight risk factors is examined as a single variable (and each has a separate impact), all of them are in some way linked to fatherhood. Poverty is more likely when a family has only one parent, particularly when that parent is the mother (as it is in 90% of single-parent households). Women

with low educational attainment, mental health problems, and substance abuse problems are less likely to attract and hold husbands who can earn the income necessary to prevent poverty, in contrast to the welfare programs of the State that do provide minimal economic support. Women who have the education and level of functioning necessary to support a family independently are less likely to put up with the inevitable burdens of marriage and more likely to believe they can compensate for the absence of a father in the home. The corrosive cumulative effects of race and racism on males and male-female relationships further strengthen the links between father absence and risk accumulation.

When it comes to asset accumulation, father absence tends to reduce the likelihood that children will have the motivation, access, and personal attributes that predict developmental asset accumulation. They are less likely to experience the stability and unconditional regard in the home that are the foundation for the 10 assets that are directly linked to family or the child's sense of self (such as, "My family provides a high level of love and

support,” and “I believe my life has a purpose.”). They are less likely to have the material and psychological support necessary to develop the cultural assets (such as “I read for pleasure three or more hours per week,” or “I play organized sports three or more hours per week.”) Present and emotionally engaged fathers can bolster the process of developmental asset accumulation just as they can prevent the accumulation of risk factors.

When all is said and done, few dimensions of the social context are more important to children than those that directly or indirectly shape the role of fathers, as both a cultural construct and as a day-to-day factor in family and community life.

*James Garbarino, PhD, holds the Maude C. Clarke Chair in Humanistic Psychology at Loyola University, Chicago.*