

Reports Show Children Need Presence of Both Parents

By Father John Flynn, LC

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ROME, NOV. 4, 2007 - Children need more than ever the presence and guidance of fathers in family life. According to a recent collection of essays, a significant body of scientific research clearly documents the vital role a father plays in the formative years of a child's life.

The book is titled "Why Fathers Count: The Importance of Fathers and Their Involvement with Children" (Men's Studies Press). Sean E. Brotherson and Joseph M. White, the editors and authors of the first chapter, set the tone for the book with an overview of arguments regarding the importance of fathers for children. The presence of a father has a positive impact in many ways, they note, as children with fathers have fewer behavioral problems, obtain better academic results, and are economically better off.

Brotherson and White also clarified that they do not in any way wish to minimize the contribution made by mothers to family life. In fact, they stated, both parents count: fathers and mothers. Nevertheless, as statistics amply confirm, there has been a marked increase in fatherless families in recent decades, hence the book's concentration on fathers.

Rob Palkovitz, a professor at the University of Delaware, dedicated a chapter on the theme of men's transition to fatherhood. Men can become fathers in a biological sense, he noted, and yet not always make the psychological and behavioral adjustments needed to embrace the role of fathering.

Being a father, Palkovitz explained, carries a different type of responsibility to that of a husband and requires an additional commitment.

This change will affect a man's choices, behavior and priorities in everyday life. This takes time, and fathering is a role that men gradually grow into.

The transition to fatherhood, he continued, is a monumental turning point in a man's life. If men are willing to undertake this relationship with their children, it is among the greatest changes in a man's life and development as a person, Palkovitz concluded.

The marriage factor

The relationship between spouses and its impact on fathers was examined in a chapter authored by University of Arkansas professor, H. Wallace Goddard.

When couples have a strong relationship they can use their differences to complement each other, and draw on each other's strengths, and there is a much greater likelihood that both mother and father will be good parents, he argued.

Goddard also noted that in many ways the contemporary dating culture does little to prepare future couples for the commitment needed to nurture and protect a marriage. A culture that overemphasizes romance and quick fixes, he pointed out, does little to prepare couples for the inevitable difficult periods that every marriage goes through.

Brotherson, from North Dakota State University, examined what he termed "connectedness" in the relationship between fathers and children. This connecting involves the building of a bond over time that is more than just the love a parent has for a child, but also the degree to which a child perceives this love and acceptance.

The connectedness, Brotherson added, is developed in the details of loving another person and the trust and closeness that develops in that relationship.

Citing various research sources on family life, Brotherson went on to explain that the more connection a child feels with his parents the more likely he or she is to trust others and enjoy stable relationships with peers and adults outside home. A close-knit family relationship is also more effective in protecting children from problems such as depression, suicide, precocious sexual activity or drug use.

The final part of the chapter offered suggestions for fathers on how they can connect with their children. Brotherson recommended playing together with children, and also helping them in their education. Being available to comfort them in times of need, expressing affection, and a shared spiritual activity such as praying together were among other points mentioned.

Paternal love

Academics Shawn Christianson and Jeffrey Stueve wrote about the importance of a father's love for their children. The majority of social science research, they maintained, does not recognize sufficiently the bond parents form with children in their loving and caring of them. Not only is there little mention of love in family theory, but many contemporary theories focus on self-interest.

A father's love for his children is often expressed in the sacrifices they make, whether in times of crisis or just in the everyday choices of family life. Obviously some fathers fail to take responsibility for their children, Christianson and Stueve acknowledged. At the same time, however, many do cooperate with their wives in raising their child.

Most research in this area has been done on fathers of younger children. It has shown that fathers are indeed capable of being sensitive to a child's needs and can show affection.

Defining fatherly love is not easy, Christianson and Stueve noted. One way to do so is to demonstrate the way in which a father is present in a child's life, helping out in physical, emotional, social and spiritual needs. The sharing of time, activities, conversation and self, means a constant support that children perceive as being enduring in their lives.

Vicky Phares and David Clay, respectively a professor and doctoral student at the University of South Florida, delved into the influence of fathers on the psychological well-being of children. They point to three main styles of parenting: authoritative, authoritarian and permissive.

Guidance

Phares and Clay explained that fathers whose parenting style is authoritative -- combining control with warmth and regard -- are more likely to have children who feel secure and demonstrate good mental health.

Another influential factor is the emotional availability of fathers. Being engaged in a child's life, and responsive to emotional needs, is important in the healthy development of children and adolescents.

The role of fathers in the moral development of their children was pondered by Terrance Olson and James Marshall, respectively from Brigham Young University and the University of Kansas.

Having a moral influence is manifested in varying ways, they pointed out. It can be something as simple as keeping promises made to a child, or putting certain boundaries by making clear which behaviors are acceptable and which are not.

In this sense, while it is true that the quantity of time fathers devote to their children is important, it is also vital how a father reacts to a child's needs and behavior. The personal example a father gives, and how they teach their children to treat others in the community, are additional opportunities for teaching. In this way fathers have many possibilities to transmit attitudes and values to their children and teach them the implications of moral responsibility.

Benedict XVI continued his frequent commentaries on the importance of families in his Sept. 13 address to the new Slovak ambassador to the Holy See, Jozef Dravecky.

"The family is the nucleus in which a person first learns human love and cultivates the virtues of responsibility, generosity and fraternal concern," the Pontiff commented.

"Strong families are built on the foundation of strong marriages. Strong societies are built on the foundation of strong families," the Pope continued. He then urged that governments acknowledge, respect and support marriage, in which a man and a woman join together in a lifelong commitment.

An undertaking indeed vital for the flourishing of future generations.

Distributed by

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