

Pocket Guide On

Why Children Need Fathers

Five Critical Trends

By P. George Tryfiates



Why Children Need Fathers

The man speaks matter-of-factly about his daily life. He rises at an hour that rivals the early-morning talk show hosts and reaches his office soon after. His wife handles the morning family duties, and he wraps up work in the afternoon. Then he returns home to help his eight-year-old great nephew with his homework and to share dinner with his family. Does he socialize much with colleagues? Not really, the man responds. "My wife and I made a decision to devote our lives to raising this child." The man is Justice Clarence Thomas of the U.S. Supreme Court. He is speaking about his commitment to Mark, the great nephew to whom he acts as a father.

The guardians of "science" have dropped the ball in the supposedly scientific quest for truth. The American Psychological Association (APA) is the best recent example. A controversial APA report suggests that fathers are not so important, but its authors confess they have a political agenda. And, clearly, their agenda has clouded their conclusions.

The authors reached their conclusions based on a limited study of only 200 men for six short years. Despite this serious lack, the authors at least admit their motives:

"We realize that our reading of the scientific literature supports our political agenda," they write. "Our goal is to generate public policy initiatives that support men in their fathering role, without discriminating against women and same-sex couples. We are also interested in encouraging public policy that supports the legitimacy of diverse family structures, rather than policy that privileges [sic] the two-parent, heterosexual, married family."

At least in this case, science has given up even pretending to search for "truth." But, that doesn't mean the truth cannot be found!

Unlike the APA, Concerned Women for America (CWA) doesn't hijack bad science to "support our political agenda."

Our mission is simple and unequivocal: "to protect and promote Biblical values among all citizens – first through prayer, then education, and finally by influencing our society – thereby reversing the decline in moral values in our nation."

We observe in America a growing disrespect for marriage. The growth of intended single-parent families and attempts to promote same-sex marriage, and the rise in divorce and unmarried cohabitation, all work to weaken the family.

CWA, meanwhile, has heard from parents around the nation and conducted much of our own research. We have found five trends we believe will influence fathers and families in the new millennium.

1. Absolute truth.

There is such a thing! And wishing it weren't so doesn't make that fact go away. But, sad to say, many of us fail to own up to this fundamental reality. When people deny the reality of absolute truth, they can deny or rationalize away just about anything.

If the family is to survive in America, society must begin to recognize that a biblically defined family, as laid out in God's Word, works best. And, for good reason: This is an absolute truth. A father, a mother and their children form the best family structure for building the future. While some have no choice but to face widowhood, divorce or out-of-wedlock pregnancy, the Biblical model of two parents re-mains the unchallenged best approach to successful families and child rearing. (And who knows this better than the single parent with the tough job of raising children alone?)

Society's denial that absolute truth exists poses a simple danger to the future of fathers and families: Without absolute truth there is no standard. There is no sense of accountability for actions. Much research about fatherhood speaks of the influence a wife and children have on a stereotypical man. They inspire him to seize his responsibilities to his family rather than run from them.

In his 1991 survey of what Americans believe, George Barna discovered most simply do not believe in absolute truth. By a margin of 67 percent, the general public told Barna they agreed strongly or somewhat that “there is no such thing as absolute truth.”

Worse yet, those who say they are “born again” deny this reality by a 52-percent majority, saying they agree strongly or somewhat strongly with the statement. Among evangelicals, the number is a majority of 53 percent.

Mainline-Protestants deny absolute truth by a 73-percent margin, and Catholics by 68 percent.

When reality is denied, imagination and opinion take over. Moral courage takes a back seat to selfishness. A successful, prosperous and peaceful society cannot be built on the lie that absolute truth does not exist. It's more than a lie: It's also self-contradictory. The person who insists “there is no such thing as absolute truth” himself considers that an absolute truth!

People may ignore basic reality and indulge their selfish desires, but, as with any other law of the created order, consequences will follow. Usually, as talk radio's Dr. Laura Schlessinger warns her listeners again and again, the children will suffer first. And, ultimately, so will anyone who refuses to recognize absolute standards of right and wrong.

2. Feminism.

The feminist movement is beginning to re-evaluate its presumptions and hard-core self-centeredness. Some are awakening to the reality that children are what God always said they were: “a heritage of the Lord,” a delight and a blessing.

Even the matriarch of the feminist movement, Betty Friedan, faces serious criticism. An article in the September 1999 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* criticizes Friedan's influential book, *The Feminist Mystique*. It notes that “in the thirty-six years since [the book] appeared, much has been written challenging the authority of the sources on which Friedan relied, raising the uncomfortable question of whether a book can arrive at the larger truths if the bricks on which it is built won't stand up to time.”

The Atlantic Monthly also cites challenges to many of Friedan's supposed experts, including anthropologist Margaret Mead and sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, whose own work has been discredited by his methods and motives. According to the magazine, Kinsey, who has come under withering fire from Concerned Women for America, “was stimulated by his voyeurism and sexual adventurousness.” Not exactly a dispassionate observer of American sexual habits.

Feminist Susan Faludi has published *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, a lament over the next generation's growing rejection of the basic tenets of hard-core feminism. Others – conservative authors Wendy Shalit and Danielle Crittenden among them – confirm that Faludi should be concerned.

Shalit aims her arrows at the sexual revolution of the '60s and argues that women have lost out as a result. Her conclusion: to return to more traditional approaches to dating and marriage. Crittenden, meanwhile, suggests more defined male/female roles are a good idea after all!

These trends regarding feminism point back to a standard, an objective reality, that gives men and women the most satisfaction. Observers like Faludi, Shalit and Crittenden realize that the next generation is looking for more traditional sources of happiness rather than trying to destroy marriage and family in that relentless pursuit. In fact, too many young people have felt the negative consequences of their parents' self-centered liberalism. Many want to avoid the same mistakes.

Sir William Blackstone, the central authority for American law during the founding era, explains human happiness well: “For [the Creator] has so intimately connected, so inseparably interwoven, the laws of eternal justice with the happiness of each individual.” We simply must have one if we want the other. If we obey the laws of eternal justice, the happiness of each individual will inevitably follow.

3. Single-Parent Families.

Consider the data: Nearly 75 percent of American children who live without a father in their home will experience poverty before they turn 11 years old. Violent criminals are usually male, and most of them grew up without fathers. They account for 60 percent of rapists in our country, 72 percent of adolescent murderers and 70 percent of long-term prison inmates (Source: National Fatherhood Initiative). The statistics go on and on.

The National Marriage Project (1999) of Rutgers University suggests that “the trend toward single-parent families is probably the most important of the recent family trends” because “children in such families have negative life outcomes at two to three times the rate of children in married, two-parent families.” The percentage of children under 18 living with a single parent has jumped from 9 percent in 1960 to 28 percent in 1998. Of those children in single-parent families, 84 percent live with their mothers and only 16 percent with their fathers.

The aim of this booklet is not to heap accusations or discouragement upon single parents. Many do an admirable job of loving, disciplining and training their children, with even greater sacrifice than most married parents experience.

Still, the future rests with the next generation. The job one generation does in raising the next one often begins a cycle. The National Marriage Project reports, “There is now ample evidence that stable and satisfactory marriages are crucial for the well-being of adults.” Out-of-wedlock births have substantially increased those children who grow up in what the Project calls “fragile families.”

This is a serious trend that must be resolved before America will reap the harvest of strong, intact families needed for its own peace and prosperity. The social pathologies of many (but not all) single-parent families weaken our society.

4. Marriage, Divorce and “Unmarried Cohabitation.”

America’s no-fault divorce laws make it easier to walk away from a spouse than from a mortgage. The resulting divorce culture is arguably the most serious assault on families.

The facts are frightening. Within two years of a divorce, 70 percent of fathers are no longer active in their children’s lives. Within ten years, 90 percent are out of the picture (Source: National Center for Fathering).

Not only are more marriages ending in divorce, fewer are even taking place. Dr. David Popenoe and Dr. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead of the National Marriage Project report that the number of new marriages plunged more than 43 percent between 1960 and 1996 (Source: “The State of our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America”).

One reason for the drop in marriages was the increase in unmarried cohabitation. The term “skyrocket” is too tame.

Between 1960 and 1998, Popenoe and Whitehead reveal, “The number of unmarried couples in America increased by close to 1000 percent! Over half of all first marriages are now preceded by living together, compared to virtually none earlier in the century.” They warn, “With unmarried cohabitation increasing very rapidly, marriage is giving way to unwed unions.”

If married couples can walk away from their commitments with hardly a second thought, an unmarried couple has it even worse: They do not have a vow before God to hold them together. “Unmarried cohabitation” grows out of selfish convenience. The children of a cohabiting couple possibly face weaker family relationships than those caused by divorce.

Recent “modest reductions” in divorce and unwed births have occurred. However, the National Marriage Project reports that it is too soon to tell if they will become long-term trends.

5. Fatherhood.

Modern American culture's disparagement of fatherhood can be discouraging, to say the least. The feminist movement's growing re-evaluation may help reverse that outlook, but until then, both fathers and mothers are called to resist the culture's false promises of sexual freedom and parenthood without responsibility.

As the National Marriage Project reveals, most single-parent families are headed by moms. But families also need dads. The growing number of single-parent households, created no doubt by society's tolerance of no-fault divorce, sets up fatherless children for future failure.

As Karl Zinsmeister wisely points out (*The American Enterprise*, September 1999), "A man's residence in his family is a billboard-sized tribute to his willingness to accept the consequences of his actions." And Zinsmeister isn't the only one talking about the value of fatherhood. In recent years a growing fatherhood movement has come of age, from Promise Keepers to the burgeoning number of how-to resources.

Fathers must be encouraged to seize with gusto the joys – as well as the labors – of responsibility. Their children desperately need the love, emotional support and role model they provide. The trend, despite the APA's political agenda, is in favor of men who recognize the role of fathers and who take their marriage vows seriously.

The Truth About Fatherhood

Marriage, fatherhood, the refusal to divorce and a commitment to the two-parent household are critical to the next generation's future. But doesn't this simply recognize that the best way to secure the future is to recognize absolute truth? Not only is it revealed to us in the natural world, it is confirmed in the revelation found in the Bible. It's time for Americans to begin a trend toward recognizing fundamental truths – including the essentiality of fathers in families of the new millennium.

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