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# “Fathers Are Not Fungible” — Why Fathers Matter

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Father’s Day is fast becoming America’s most socially awkward holiday. The reason is very simple — the culture increasingly sees fathers as accessories, not as necessities.

In some communities, as many as eighty percent of all babies are born to single mothers. A host of Hollywood actresses and entertainment figures have opted to have babies without husbands or fathers. Added to this, the local sperm bank now makes all this possible with a man’s contribution restricted to an anonymous background

role.

What is lost in all this? W. Bradford Wilcox of the University of Virginia argues that fathers play an essential role in the raising of children. His recent study, “[Religion, Race, and Relationships in Urban America](#),” suggests that fathers play a very important role in five specific domains of children’s lives.

As Wilcox explains, fathers serve this unique role in providing financially for their children, protecting their children from abuse and neglect, teaching their children how to regulate their bodies and emotions through play, disciplining their children (especially boys), and modeling good male-female relationships to their sons and daughters.

Wilcox’s study is important because it adds solid social science data and analysis to what we already knew — that fathers really matter (and that the absence of fathers is a sign of big trouble).

In an interview with Kathryn Jean Lopez of *National Review*, Wilcox summarized his findings. As he explains, “In urban America, the social science indicates that children who grow up in intact, married families are significantly more likely to succeed in schools, to avoid teenage pregnancy, and to steer clear of the law.”

Wilcox directed his research toward the social sector in which fathers are least likely to be found — the inner city. As he explains:

*My interviews with inner-city women and mothers suggest that many of them do not think that fathers play a central role in the rearing of children. They think that single mothers can do just as good a job, on average, as married couples. Of course, this notion is also common among many well-educated professional women.*

*What these women don’t know is that the best and latest social science indicates that children are most likely to thrive in intact, married families headed by mothers and fathers. So one of the great challenges of our day is communicating the latest family social science to average Americans so that they can do better by their children, or the children that they will one day bear or sire. In a word, our society needs to rediscover that fathers are not fungible.*

That warning bears repeating — *fathers are not fungible.*

Wilcox’s research also indicated that church attendance and involvement was a major factor in encouraging men to fulfill their roles as husbands and fathers. In urban areas, men who attend church are more likely to abide by a “code of decency” that requires fathers to provide, protect, and participate in the lives of their children (and the life of the children’s

mother).

In another interview, Wilcox pointed to four key findings of his research.

First Finding:

*Children living with their fathers in an intact, married home are almost 50 percent less likely to be sexually abused than children living in a single-parent home.*

Second Finding:

*Boys who grow up with their fathers in an intact, married home are 50 percent less likely to end up in prison as young adults than children living in a single-parent or step-family.*

Third Finding:

*Girls who grow up apart from their fathers typically experience the onset of puberty at an earlier age and have sex at an earlier age than girls who grow up with their fathers in an intact, married home. They are also three times more likely to become young, unwed mothers.*

Fourth Finding:

*Communities with large numbers of fatherless households are significantly more likely to experience high levels of murder and robbery.*

The Christian understanding of the role and importance of fathers is established in the Bible, not in social science.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to note the expanding number of credible studies that point, like Bradford Wilcox, to the importance of fathers and to the social and personal costs of marginalizing fatherhood in the culture.

Professor Wilcox is profoundly right — fathers are not fungible.

