Life Without Father: What Happens to the Children?

Children raised without their fathers run serious risks. Why? Answering this question can help shape productive policies, and perhaps quiet the culture war raging around single parenthood.

By Sara McLanahan

Over half of all children born in the United States today will, if current trends continue, live apart from at least one of their biological parents—usually the father—before they reach adulthood. A substantial proportion (about one-fifth) will never live with their fathers. These families are economically vulnerable and they disproportionately represent ethnic minorities. As almost all Americans have either experienced divorce or are close to people who have, the consequences of divorce are of personal as well as social interest.

The conventional wisdom on the issue of father absence has shifted dramatically over the past four decades. During the 1960s, most people viewed divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing as leading inevitably to delinquency, school failure, and other social problems. During the 1970s, the pendulum swung in the opposite direction. Leading sociologists argued that single motherhood was just another lifestyle reflecting women’s growing economic independence and freedom to leave unhappy marriages. Since the mid-1980s, a new consensus holds that although most children of divorced parents do all right, growing up without a father increases the risk of numerous undesirable outcomes. Whether or not these outcomes are caused by the divorce itself, as opposed to something else about the family, remains controversial.

The Scope of the Problem

Children raised apart from a biological parent are disadvantaged in numerous ways. They are more likely to drop out of high school, less likely to attend college, and less likely to graduate from college than children raised by both biological parents. Girls from father-absent families are more likely to become sexually active at a younger age and to have a child outside of marriage. Boys who grow up without their fathers are more likely to have trouble finding (and keeping) a job in young adulthood. Young adult men and women from one-parent families tend to work at low-paying jobs.

The popular perception of these effects is subjective. High school graduation is one example. Some argue that the effects of father absence are small, noting that most children living apart from their fathers graduate from high school (80 percent, as compared with 90 percent for children in two-parent families). Others argue that the effects are large, noting that dropout rates double (from 10 percent to 20 percent) when fathers are gone. Most of the outcomes described above follow this pattern and therefore are subject to these two conflicting interpretations.

Although father absence is much more common among ethnic minorities and low-income families, the penalties associated with single parenthood appear to be more or less similar for children from all socioeconomic backgrounds. Where differences do exist, the costs tend to be higher for children from white and middle-class backgrounds than for children from more disadvantaged backgrounds. In other words, children from advantaged backgrounds seem to lose more when their fathers leave. Possible explanations are that living without a father is more common in poorer communities, or children from middle-class families have more to lose. In most instances, children of widowed mothers fare better than children of divorced and never-married mothers, perhaps because widows experience less economic insecurity (they are eligible for social security benefits) or because a father’s death disrupts a child’s family and friendship ties less than a divorce does. Also, a child is less likely to feel rejected by a parent who dies than a parent who is absent by choice.

Some believe that children of never-married mothers fare worse than children raised by divorced mothers. The evidence suggests otherwise. Once differences in parents’ economic circumstances are

taken into account, these two groups of children do equally well. What about children who grow up in stable cohabiting unions? Unfortunately, social scientists can say little about whether a child born to unmarried parents who stay together is disadvantaged relative to a child born to married parents who stay together. Since cohabitation was relatively rare until recently, and since long-term cohabiting unions are still very rare, we know little about the long-term effects on children of this family arrangement.

Remarriage is another instance where general perceptions are distorted. Children in stepfamilies fare no better than children in single-parent families and in some instances fare worse. Frank Furstenberg and Andrew Cherlin, two leading family sociologists, attribute this finding to the lack of established societal guidelines about how stepfamilies should operate. Parents and children therefore constantly negotiate over their rights and responsibilities. Other researchers claim that biological parenthood benefits children more than step-parenthood for genetic reasons.

**Does Father Absence Cause Poor Outcomes in Children?**

While most researchers agree that father absence is associated with adverse outcomes among children, they disagree over whether it causes those outcomes. Many think that parental conflict is the source of the problem. We know that conflict is bad for children, and we also know that parents who divorce experience more conflict than parents who stay together. Conflict is not the whole story, however. Many couples that divorce do not experience high levels of conflict.

Other scholars argue that the negative outcomes associated with father absence are due to flaws in the character or genes of one or both of the parents. Alcoholism and depression, for example, can cause both family instability as well as poor outcomes in children. One way to test this theory is to look at children before and after their parents separate. If the “flawed individual” argument is correct, we would expect the children in these families to be doing poorly even before their parents’ divorce. Andrew Cherlin and his colleagues have taken this approach, using a large study that followed children born in England in 1958. They found that some, but not all, of the harm suffered by children whose fathers were absent could be explained by conditions that preceded the divorce.

The economist Jonathan Gruber has taken a different approach. Noting that parents (irrespective of their flaws) are less likely to divorce in states that make divorce more difficult, he compared children in these two types of states. Gruber found that those who grew up in states with easy access to divorce obtained less education and had lower incomes as adults than children who grew up in states that discouraged divorce.

Yet another way to assess whether divorce causes children to do worse is to compare children who have the same parents (or parent) but experience different family structures. Sibling differences can occur if the parents divorce after the first child grows up but before the last child leaves home, or if a single mother remarries, has a second child, and remains married to the second husband. Researchers find that in families like these, both siblings fare worse than children raised by two parents, suggesting that the problem is the parents (or parent) rather than the divorce itself.

In sum, the evidence is mixed with respect to whether divorce causes children to have problems or whether the problems associated with divorce are due to poor parenting or even poor genes.

**Why Does Father Absence Make a Difference?**

Three general factors account for the disadvantages associated with father absence: economic deprivation, poor parenting and lack of social support. Economic insecurity is probably the most important reason why children who live apart from their fathers tend to be less successful. In the United States, where childrearing is primarily a private rather than a public responsibility parental income is significant. It determines the quality of child care and health care that children receive, and it also determines the quality of their education. School quality is closely related to where parents live, with the best schools typically found in more expensive neighborhoods. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 1995, the median income of two-parent families with children under age 18 was just over $50,000, as compared with just under $18,000 for female-headed families. Half of families headed by single mothers live below the poverty line, as compared with 10 percent of two-parent families. Of course, many single-mother families were poor even before the father left the household, but in most instances, the departure of the father reduced their economic prospects even further.
Income cannot account for all of the disadvantages of children without fathers, however. The fact that children in stepfamilies do just as poorly as children in single-mother families tells us that something other than financial deprivation is at work. The most obvious problem is that a father’s absence reduces a child’s access to parental attention. Interacting with the estranged mother and building a new relationship with the child can be a difficult and painful experience for a nonresident father, and many men respond by disengaging from the children.

A father’s absence may also affect the quality of the mother-child relationship. The economic hardship and insecurity of single parenthood can bring on depression and psychological distress, thereby interfering with good mothering. Even among middle-class families, the departure of the father from the household can trigger disruptions in household routines such as meals and bedtimes, and undermine discipline. With their time, energy, and spirit stretched thin, some single mothers become too lenient and others become too rigid or strict. Neither mothering style bodes well for children.

The loss of social support is the third reason why father absence matters. The sustaining web of facilities, programs, people, and care providers that back up parents’ efforts is likely to decline when families are forced to move, which is often the case after divorce (and remarriage). The longer a family resides in the same community or neighborhood, the more likely the parent is to know about opportunities for the child. The mother is more likely to know about after-school programs and the names of the best teachers, and to have the connections and influence to access these resources. Even children who do not move may lose touch with people and other valuable resources. For example, many children lose access to their father’s family and friends, and they may also be cut off from their mother’s family and friends if she is too stressed and weary to maintain old relationships.

**WHAT CAN BE DONE?**

The United States is not the only country that has experienced increases in divorce and nonmarital childbirth in the past four decades. Indeed, although divorce is more common in the United States, bearing children out of wedlock is more common in the Scandinavian countries. Yet the conditions that single mothers face there are very different. For example, the poverty rate—measured as having income below 50 percent of median income—for single-mother families is 55 percent in the United States, 52 percent in Canada, 24 percent in the Netherlands, 46 percent in the U.K. and 7 percent in Sweden. Although part of this difference is due to differences in who becomes a single mother (single mothers in the United States are younger, less educated and more likely to be nonwhite than single mothers in other countries), most of the difference is due to welfare-state policies. Whereas in the United States, government assistance reduces poverty rates by about 15 percent, in Sweden public support reduces poverty by 90 percent.

Given that poverty rates among single mothers are much lower in other nations than in the United States, the effects of single motherhood might be expected to be much more benign elsewhere. Yet this is not always the case. Although children in single-mother families fare better in Sweden, where their poverty rates are low, they also appear to do well in Canada, where poverty rates are high. And, somewhat surprisingly, they do poorly in the U.K. and the Netherlands, where poverty rates are lower than in the United States. So the cross-national picture is something of a puzzle and suggests (once again) that economic deprivation is not the whole story.

Aside from easing the economic problems of children without fathers, we can try to reduce their risks more directly. First, we can make sure that parents are informed about the potential risks associated with the father’s departure and the ways in which they can minimize the risks. While information alone is not likely to have a huge effect on divorce (or non-marital childbirth), it may encourage some parents to try to rebuild their marriage and it may encourage others to work harder at maintaining a cooperative relationship after divorce.

Second, we can make sure that social policies do not discourage marriage. Although this point may seem obvious to most people, our current tax and transfer system is not neutral. Rather, it contains numerous “marriage penalties” that discourage permanent unions for couples at all income levels. These penalties include categorical restrictions that limit benefits to certain groups of parents (e.g., single mothers) as well as “income tests” and tax schedules that favor one-parent families over two-parent families in some instances.

For instance, take a couple in which both parents have little education and both work for low wages. This couple must choose between living together and getting very little help from the government or living apart and getting a great deal of help, including cash assistance, child care subsidies
and health care subsidies. If the mother believes that the father’s employment prospects are poor, she may decide that living alone is more beneficial economically than living with her child’s father.

Working-class families also face a “marriage penalty.” One of the most popular (and fastest growing) programs in the United States is the Earned Income Tax Credit, a program that provides a subsidy to parents with low incomes. A single mother earning $12,000 a year can receive an additional $3,000 from the government. If she lives with a man who earns $15,000, however, the family receives nothing. One way to deal with the disincentives inherent in income-tested programs is to make the individual, rather than the family, the basis for determining taxes and transfers. If we followed this course, people’s taxes and transfers would not be affected by their decisions to marry or cohabit. Of course, such an approach would be very expensive because more families would qualify for benefits. But it would probably also increase the incidence of marriage.

A third way to minimize the potential harm associated with a father’s departure is to insist that fathers support their children even when they live elsewhere. This means establishing paternity for children born outside wedlock and enforcing child-support obligations for all children with an absent father. Unlike our welfare and tax systems, which discourage marriage, child-support enforcement reduces divorce and nonmarital childbearing. It not only prevents fathers from leaving but also mitigates the negative effects of their going by reducing the economic insecurity of single mothers. In short, child support enforcement is a win-win policy, which is one reason why it has received broad bipartisan support in Congress. Unfortunately for low-income children, the situation is not quite so rosy. Since welfare benefits are reduced by one dollar for each dollar of child support a mother receives, child support collections do not improve the economic status of children in welfare households. This policy saves welfare dollars, but it does not benefit children’s welfare. It may even harm children by increasing tension and conflict between low-income parents.

What about joint custody and visitation? Real joint custody is hard to sustain, and moderate levels of visitation do not help children much. What does seem to help is a close father-child relationship, which depends on the parents’ ability to minimize conflict after divorce. Because of this finding, some states have started to mandate parent workshops and counseling sessions at the time of divorce to inform parents of the benefits (to their children) of maintaining a positive coparenting relationship and to increase their communication skills.

Finally, if we are serious about keeping fathers and their children together, we should be doing much more for “fragile families,” defined as unmarried parents who are raising a child together. Not only is this group of families growing much faster than divorcing families, in most instances, the parents in these families have high hopes for a future together at the time their child is born. Yet because of their marginal financial circumstances, these parents face many barriers to achieving a stable family life, including potentially harmful government policies. Helping these families form and maintain a stable union is not a matter of changing the minds of parents who no longer want to be together. Rather, it is a matter of helping them achieve their goals. Policies that strengthen fragile families should appeal both to conservatives who want to promote marriage and to liberals who want to increase the “marriageability” of low-income parents.

**Recommended Resources**


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