

FATHERS AND TEENAGERS: Social Facts and Biblical Values

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Introduction

This paper will investigate the empirical information available from studies done since 1980 regarding the relationship between fathers and teenagers in the United States, and seek to make public policy recommendations for this area in light of specific biblical values.

Section I will focus on the empirical data for both behavior and attitudes of fathers and teenagers. Many studies have linked teenage behavioral problems to young people's early family life and the effects of divorce or parental absence. The discussion will include two parent homes and single parent homes. One factor which has not been extensively studied is the role of the father in establishing and maintaining the cohesiveness of the home and the effect of the father on adolescent development. Many personal and social problems continue to rise among teens even though the number of divorces has leveled off in the U.S. since 1982. (Beal, 1987)

Section II will discuss values derived from the Bible regarding families, especially fathers duties to their children and the role of parental influence on developing young people. Positive values exist which can give direction to efforts at meeting the problems identified in Section I. These social and moral values are trans-cultural and are derived from biblical values in the Judeo-Christian heritage. The social and moral values can be taught and practiced without necessarily involving the spiritual beliefs and religious activities of any particular religion or denomination.

In Section III suggestions will be made regarding public policies in light of Sections I and II. The nature of governmental influence in family life is examined. Government has both direct and indirect influence on families already. Possible steps for positive influence will be suggested.

I. Empirical Studies

This discussion will be based on studies done in the late 1970's and in the 1980's. Teenage personal problems and anti-social behavior have risen quickly in the last ten years. When asked why teens breakdown, Billy Graham said, "I am convinced the basic answer lies in the rapid and severe erosion of family life today. The family is one of the most fundamental means God uses to communicate with us and shape us." (1987) Much earlier, Lyndon B. Johnson, at the Commencement Address at Howard University (June 4, 1965), said, ". . . unless we work to strengthen the family, to create conditions under which most parents will stay together--all the rest: schools, and playgrounds, and public assistance, and private concern, will never be enough to cut completely the circle of despair and deprivation." Thus, for twenty years it has been accepted in wide public circles that the family is in crisis.

What is family life like right now in the 1980's? There are 63 million families in the U.S. (NYT, Sept. 17, 1986, III:1:4) Eighteen million families are headed by single parents, mostly mothers. (NYT, Feb. 19, 1986, III:4:6) Single father families account for only 600,000 families. (Greif, 1985) The number of these single father families has tripled since 1970. One child in five in the U.S. now lives with a single parent. (Dornbusch, 1985) Fifty percent of all poor families are headed by a single woman. 49.4% of mothers with a child less than one year old are working part or full time. (NYT, March 16, 1986, I:25:1)

In NY City 40% (700,000) of children in the city live in poverty. (NYT, June 8, 1986, VI:38:1) In the nation as a whole 20% of the children live in poverty. On July 12, 1986 the New York Times reported that the persistent high divorce rate is leading to widespread child neglect because of emotional and economic stress, not because of lack of concern. (II:5:2)

1,100,000 teenage girls will become pregnant this year. 400,000 of these will have abortions and 600,000 will keep their babies. But 80% of those who keep their babies will drop out of school and 70% will go on welfare. 60% of all pregnant girls will be pregnant again within two years. 60% of those who get married will be divorced within five years. (Kessler, 1987, p. 525)

In spite of these terrible statistics, a Harris poll (1980) showed that 96% of Americans put 'have a good family life' at the top of their goals (NYT, Sept. 25, 1986, III:7:1) 63% of college freshmen agreed. In a Gallup poll "a good family life" was the number one social value. (The Family, 1986, p. 7)

A. Teen Behavior

Olson reports (1983) that teens (adolescents) say they have a hard time communicating with both parents. Mothers think they communicate effectively. Dads know there is not good communication. Mothers tend to be more open (ie. willing) in their communication. (p. 222) Parents see the greatest stresses with teens as (1) increased outside activities, (2) financial load. Teens see greatest stresses with parents as (1) day to day hassles, (2) pressure to do well in school. (p. 227-230) The three greatest stresses on the whole family during years with teens are (1) finances, (2) marital satisfaction, (3) family accord. (p.230) However, 90% of mothers claim their relationship with their teens is as good after a divorce as before. 58% of the fathers say it is as good. 68% of teens say it is worse. (Hagestad, et.al., 1984)

Even in two parent families, if there are four or more children, a third or fourth girl reports less father closeness. Middle boys (second of three children or third of four children) have more problems with both parents. (Bell and Avery, 1985)

Strommen and Strommen in Five Cries of Parents (1985) report that 2/3 of 9th graders list 'make my own decisions' at the top of their list of desires from their family. (p. 69) A study of 10,467 parents show that 20% are not happy in their marriage (9th graders noticed this far more than 5th graders did). (p. 71) If the child feels like an emotional orphan, 60% consider suicide. (p. 71) 58% of 5th graders feel they can talk over their problems with parents; 37% of 9th graders. 2/3 of parents and 9th graders would like to talk over the problems but few do so. (p. 74) 53% of teens spend less than 30 min. per day with dad. (p. 78) 39% of teens feel their parents are too strict. (p. 88)

They also found that verbal affection daily from parents decreases from 61% of mothers and 40% of fathers in 5th grade to 37% of mothers and 24 % of fathers in 9th grade. (p. 95)

Over 2/3 of parents identify religion/faith as most important or one of the most important factors in life. (p. 131) Half of teens give the same response. (p. 133) 3/4 of parents want to help children grow in faith. (p. 136) But teens report (68%) that faith or religion is discussed once or twice a month at most. (p. 134) 60% of teens don't know what to believe about God. Only 46% of teens rate church or synagogue as very important (p. 139) When asked who they would turn to in a family crisis, 27% of mothers and 31 % of fathers said clergy. The second category of persons to turn to was 16% mothers and 26% fathers - no one. The third category was 17% mothers and 14 % of fathers - medical doctors. (p. 162)

Rekers (1985) says that 70% of mothers resent the time they have to spend with young children. (p. 68) A two year study with teens concludes that 90% of daily verbal inputs are negative (parents, schools,

peers). (p. 95)

These statistics look very bad for the family, however, not all families are even fortunate enough to have two parents present. Judith Wallerstein, reporting on a ten-year study, concludes that divorce can so disturb youngsters that they become psychologically unable to live happy lives as adults. (The Family, 1986)

Joe Frost, of Stanford University, reported in 1985 that children in single-parent families headed by a mother have higher arrest rates, more disciplinary problems in school, and a greater tendency to smoke and run away from home than do their peers who live with both natural parents--no matter what their income, race, or ethnicity. (The Family, p. 13)

John Guidubaldi, of Kent State, noted "far more detrimental effects of divorce on boys than on girls." (The Family, 1986, p. 13). Late adolescent children from single parent families (the parents are divorced, separated or one is dead) show significantly lower self-esteem, decreased feelings of self-satisfaction and reduced feelings of personal worth. (Beissenger, 1976; in Beal, 1987) Dornbusch reports (1985) that teen boys in single mother and mother-stepfather situations have a higher indication of deviance. Natural parents together always had the lowest score for deviance for either sex child. Mother alone households are much more likely to allow the child to make their own decisions [for better or for worse].

A seven year study was done in Seattle and Denver on the effects of receiving welfare. Dissolution of marriages was 36% higher for whites receiving the benefits than for those who did not, and 42% higher for blacks. (The Family, 1986, p. 15)

If the rate of family fragmentation had not increased, there would have been 4.2 million households below the poverty line in 1980, instead of the 6.2 million which were actually in poverty then. (The Family, 1986, p. 15)

For children, the key determinant of poverty is whether they live in an intact family. Between 1960 and 1985, poverty among children in two-parent families decreased almost by half. Among minorities, intact families have attained incomes much nearer the national average (The Family, p. 23). The formation of households without a bread-winner, usually through illegitimacy, often through desertion is the root of child poverty in America. This is the brutal fact: only one-fifth of children are in single-parent families, but they make up over one-half of all children in poverty. (The Family, p. 23)

Armand Nicholi (Changes in the American Family, nd) reports that over a million children a year are involved in divorce cases. (p. 2) He says that 13 million children under 18 (over one-half of all U.S.children) have one or both parents missing, and that within three years after the divorce decree half the fathers never see their children.

A fifteen year study of several hundred young men who dropped out of Harvard showed two characteristics: (1) a marked isolation and alienation from their parents, especially their fathers, and (2) an overwhelming apathy and lack of motivation. (Nicholi, p. 4) He added, "The majority underlying difficulty found was the absence of the father from the home." (Kessler, 1987, p. 115)

Male teens have an immediately difficult time coping with divorce, females have a more difficult time longer range. (Glen and Kramer, 1985)

Dr. Urie Bronfenbrenner told a Senate committee that "the junior high years are probably the most critical to the development of a child's mental healthy. It is during this period of self-doubt that the personality is often assaulted and damaged beyond repair." (James Dobson, Kessler, 1987, p. 157)

Josh McDowell, who has spoken to millions of teens, reports of one occasion when "I had forty-two personal appointments with junior high and high school students who wanted counselling. I asked each one of these kids, 'Can you talk with your father?' Only one said yes." (Kessler, 1987, p. 215)

A study in the Archives of General Psychiatry showed that the periodic absence of the father in 200 children's cases had the same emotional results as the death of the father would have had. (Nicholi, p. 4)

Several other studies bear on the absence or inaccessibility of the father and all point to the same conclusions: A father absent for long periods contributes to (a) low motivation for achievement, (b) inability to defer immediate gratification for later rewards, (c) low self-esteem, (d) susceptibility to group influence and to juvenile delinquency. (Nicholi, p. 5)

The effects of divorce on children was reported in 1980 by Wallerstein and Kelley. The initial reaction of over 90 % of the children was "an acute sense of shock". Half of the children feared being abandoned forever by the parent who left. One-third feared being abandoned by the custodial parent. Five years after the divorce 37 percent of the children were moderately to severely depressed, . . . and their unhappiness was greater at five years than it had been at one and a half years after the divorce. (Nicholi, p. 6)

In contrast to this, some families are doing well and the children appear to be making the adjustment to adult life successfully. Barnes & Olson (Parent-Adolescent Communication. ERIC, 56: 438-47) say that parents report few problems communicating with teens. (Teens report problems in general and especially with fathers) But families with good parent-child communication had high levels of family cohesion, adaptability and satisfaction.

Studies have shown significant correlations linking father-headed family structure, parental control over the sex education of their children and traditional values to lower rates of adolescent sexual behavior. Dolores Curran (1983) studied top traits of successful families as ranked by 554 family counselors. The results were

1. communicate and listen
2. affirm and support family members
3. respect all people
4. develop a sense of trust
5. share time
6. share responsibility
7. have a sense of right and wrong
8. have rituals and traditions
9. share a religious core
10. respect privacy
11. value service to each other and to others
12. help out in problems

George Rekers (1985) reports on 3000 strong families and concludes the key traits are: 1. commitment to family, 2. spend time together, 3. good communication, 4. express appreciation, 5. spiritual commitment, 6. solve problems (The Family, p. 38)

Students who valued the work ethic, attached a high importance to education and who were religious outperformed their peers by 12 to 18 percentile points on standardized tests. (The Family, 1986, p. 42)

B. Parental Attitudes

Grotevant & Cooper report that for boys, the father-son interaction is the key in identity development. Boys in late adolescence need to make decisions in consultation with dad, but with the boy making the decision. Girls need interaction with both parents, but seem to be slightly more dependent on moms during late teens. (1985)

Most mothers of children under the age of 18 do not work full-time outside the home; in fact, only 41 % do. Of married mothers with children under six, only 33% work full-time for any period during the calendar year and only 23 % work full-time year around. Close to half of the working women with young children would prefer to remain at home with their youngsters but feel they cannot afford to do so. (The Family, p. 31)

Howard Hendricks writes, "During the adolescent years instruction becomes indirective rather than directive. That is why it is so important to be available." (Kessler, 1987, p. 44)

George Rekers of the University of South Carolina cited studies showing that "the father's active involvement in the family has a unique and highly beneficial influence upon the social, psychological, and moral development of children and adolescents. A positive and continuous relationship with one's father has been found to be associated with a good self-concept, higher self-esteem, higher self-confidence in personal and social interaction, higher moral maturity, reduced rates of unwed teen pregnancy, greater internal control, and higher career aspirations." (Gerald Regier, 1987, p. 7)

A court judge in Denver, who has handled over 28,000 delinquency cases, said, "The lack of affection between father and mother is the greatest cause of delinquency I know." (Quoted in Kessler, 1987, p. 130)

Thus, it appears most parents would like to be good leaders for their children. In fact, most think they are doing well in communicating with the children. A Louis Harris poll shows that 52% of adults believe drug abuse is the major problem of teens. (NYT, Sept. 25, 1986, III:7:1) 61% of parents believe they communicate with their children better than their parents communicated with them. (NYT, Sept. 26, 1986, I:24:2)

But the reality is that many families are in trouble. Worst affected are single parent families, especially those headed by a mother. But many two parent families are also experiencing similar problems due to misperceptions and mistaken behavior patterns of fathers and mothers.

II. Values Regarding the Father-Teenager Relationship

A. Introduction

Ronald Reagan, in his *Proclamation of National Family Week*, November 15, 1984, said, "Strong families are the foundation of society. Through them we pass on our traditions, rituals, and values. From them we receive the love, encouragement, and education needed to meet human challenges. Family life provides opportunities and time for the spiritual growth that fosters generosity of spirit and responsible citizenship."

In November of 1986 the White House Working Group on the Family reported to the President, "Parental nurturing and education of the young is our most important national investment. It is the fundamental task of humanity." (p. 5) They added, "Strong families make economic progress possible by passing on the values central to a free economy." (p. 9)

Will and Ariel Durant summarized their study of history by observing that "the family is the nucleus of

civilization." (The Family, 1986, p. 7)

The issue of parental or public responsibilities to future generations has been discussed in philosophical literature also. Thomas Swartz (Obligations to Future Generations, 1979, p. 3) says, ". . . we have no obligations to provide widespread benefits to our descendants."

Other philosophers disagreed. Gregory Kavka (1981, p. 95) says that we do have obligations to future generations and tries to spell out the nature of those obligations. Any actions which we take which effect the lives of future people, either directly or indirectly, raises the issue of how it will affect them. He concludes by designing a Maximizing Principle that any action we take which might cause restricted lives for our descendants should be avoided, in order to maximize both their and our lives.

Derek Parfit (1981) responded to Kavka's Maximizing Principle by saying that the principle must be modified by adding that we cannot be required to experience great sacrifice.

Another philosopher responded to the above argument by developing a Total Value Principle which works to balance the maximum good for both generations. (Clinton, 1987)

Of course a great deal has been written to support traditional values and the traditional patterns of family life in the United States. There is simply not space to review it all here. But the basis of the American traditional family life is found in the teachings of the Bible.

B. Biblical Values

Much has also been written about biblical values for the family. This section will review some specific biblical texts and describe their implications for family life.

Exodus 20:12 sets forth the fifth of the ten great commandments for Israel: "honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the Lord your God gives you." This first commandment with a promise assumes that the father will be known and will be leading the son in right ways. The son is to honor his parents for their life and model.

Deuteronomy sets forth the Law of God for Israel in practical terms. In chapters 6-12 there are nine references to the father being responsible to pass on to the next generation both the religious and cultural heritage of the nation. Most of these are commands from God to the father. The commands include not only the children, but servants in the house, aliens who reside with the family, and slaves. Since the father was also responsible to maintain order and to provide for the physical well-being of his household, it was clear that he did not have to do all the work (of either education or labor) by himself. He could and did delegate the actual work of education, either to his wife or to the local rabbi or to a servant in the house who was qualified. But the father was responsible before God and before the city elders for the outcome.

According to Deuteronomy 24:17-22 individual Israelites were to care for aliens, orphans and widows. The care for orphans included their education as well as their physical welfare.

In Judges 13 Manoah and his wife (the parents of Samson) are commended for their attitude. At the announcement of Samson's coming birth, Manoah prayed, "teach us what to do for the boy who is to be born."

Psalm 72:4 is a prayer that the king will "vindicate the afflicted people, save the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor." The government is to pick up the duty when the father is not able to do so.

In Psalm 146:6-9 God is praised as the one who "supports the fatherless and the widow." They are His concern, along with the establishment of justice in the land.

Ecclesiastes 12:1 is the advice of a wise father to his son about how to conduct himself in life, beginning while he is young. "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them'." The father reminds his son to act responsibly in the present to prepare for the future.

In Micah 2:1-9 the Lord condemns those who use economic or political power to the disadvantage of stranger, widows and orphans. He promises to remove the power of such people and to leave them with nothing.

Ephesians 6:4 continues the same ideas for Christians. "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Fathers have the responsibility to raise the children correctly and kindly.

Hebrews 12:6 says that fathers are to discipline their children in such a way that it is good for the children and so that the children will be able to respect their fathers. Fathers are to be role models for children.

There are many other passages which teach the rights of children, the proper forms of communication, what content should be taught to the children, etc. This brief study will have to suffice to show the direction we have indicated: fathers carry the major responsibility for educating the children and preparing them to live life successfully. Note that education included the personal (mental, moral, emotional, physical, spiritual), social, vocational, and religious life.

C. Leaders Comments

Christian leaders have also commented on these responsibilities. Charles Swindoll writes, "Because parents are the first 'significant others' to be near a child and because they fashion the child's environment, they have tremendous opportunity to mold his personality." (Kessler, 1987, p. 42)

Gordon MacDonald makes it even more to the point. "Throughout childhood and adolescence, there are key times when a child needs certain affirmations from his father. If a father fails to provide them at those times, a void is left that can probably never be filled any other way or by any other person. If a father is not available to a child who is going through adolescence, the child often experiences increased feelings of rejection. When a child seldom or never hears his father say 'Well done' he is likely to struggle all the way from his teens to mid-life." (Kessler, p. 114)

Larry Richards writes, "There are five areas of critical concern where teens are forced to go through changes and take on a more significant role." (1) developing an independent identity, (2) developing interpersonal relationships, (3) boy-girl relationships, (4) decision-making (developing values and integrity), (5) developing a relationship with God. (Kessler, 1987, p. 156) This is seconded by Bruce Barton. "The way through identity crisis is for teenagers to decide values and make choices about the future. If he does not move ahead with a settled sense of identity, he will not be able to give and receive love in the context of friendships, work or marriage." (Kessler, 1987, p. 159)

These authors illustrate the need for the father and the mother to be present in the home and family and to be a positive model for the teenagers. If this is not possible, then we may expect there to be serious problems, not only in deviant teenage behavior, but also in adjustments to coping with life in the adult world.

The statistical evidence of teenage problems without a father in the home is clear. Consistently, there are serious problems in these homes to a greater extent than in homes where the father is present. Presence alone does not insure success in raising children. The father and the mother have responsibilities to raise their children properly. Lack of realistic expectations and evaluations of the home situations leads to misperceptions and failure for adequate communication and training to take place.

III. Public Policy Implications

What has been the role of government in the development of the present state of affairs of the homes of America? What should be the role and responsibilities of government? These are serious questions which should be more real to every government policy maker than they are to most parents. The government policy maker carries the responsibility for the intervention of his agency and procedures and will be judged based on his contribution or interference. Parents and other citizens carry the responsibility for concern and action.

The Family: Preserving America's Future. A Report to the President from the White House Working Group on the Family. United States Department of Education. November 2, 1986 contains the following information.

Everywhere the equation holds true: Where there are strong families, the freedom of the individual expands and the reach of the State contracts. Where family life weakens and fails, government advances, intrudes, and ultimately compels. p. 1

Private choices have public effects. The way our fellow citizens choose to live affects many other lives. p. 3

Intact families are good. p. 3

Public policy and culture in general must support and reaffirm these decisions (to support the values and behaviors of traditional families). p. 3

A pro-family policy must recognize that the rights of the family are anterior, and superior, to those of the state. Government does not create the family, though it has an obligation to protect it. p. 4

But law and policy should presume the reasonableness of parental action, and the authority of the home should be respected except in cases of substantial risk of harm. p. 4

Will this program, this change, this law be fair, supportive, and encouraging to the families of America? Does it justify the financial burdens it would impose upon household income? p. 4

Although government cannot mandate cultural change, public officials can, as opinion leaders, influence its direction. p. 4

The family is the primary training ground for individual responsibility, for self-sacrifice, for seeking a common goal rather than self interest. p. 10

These and other decisions by the Supreme Court have crippled the potential of public policy to enforce familial obligations, demand family responsibility, protect family rights, or enhance family identity. p. 12

Good families, rich, poor or in between, provide encouragement and support to their children, but no excuses. They teach character. They insist upon standards. They demand respect. They require performance. p. 23

In a similar vein, William Bennett, in a Speech to the Fourth Annual Meeting of Networking Community-Based Services, Washington, D.C., June 10, 1986, said, "First, public leadership must do what public leadership is supposed to do: Lead. That is, public leadership must affirm with no apologies the values and ideals which our tradition has affirmed as good. We must speak up for the family. . . . We must say too that a husband and wife raising children together is preferable to a mother or father doing the job alone."

This seems to be powerful acceptance by governmental officials that the traditional family is desperately needed today for the future of our country.

But many other leaders are not willing to accept this responsibility. Armand M. Nicholi, Jr. says, "The data (concerning the adverse effects of absentee parents) are unacceptable because they conflict with currently popular trends and because they demand radical changes in our lifestyle and in our priorities". (Changes in the American Family, nd, p. 1) He goes on, "No human interaction has greater impact on our lives than our early family experience. If one factor influences the character development and emotional stability of a person, it is the quality of the relationship he experiences as a child with both of his parents. A parent's inaccessibility either physically, emotionally, or both, can exert a profound influence on the child's emotional health." (Nicholi, p. 2)

The problem here is to find a way to help government be responsible for the impact of the programs it creates or maintains. Arthur Simon writes, "The will is more crucial and more stubbornly evasive than the necessary technology. And the will must be expressed in millions of individual efforts but translated into national policy decisions as well." (1987, p. 44)

How can positive influence be brought to bear on government leaders to make responsible decisions and programs? First, we need to encourage the many government leaders who do manifest such responsibility. We need to help them to gain platforms for further influence.

Second, we need to help legislative leaders to understand the critical situation which exists and the true implications of the future of our country if the tide is not turned around. This can be done by positive, helpful discussions, letters, and expressions of concern; both in the district and in the Congress.

Third, those who are qualified to give statistical advice or legal advice must take the time and effort to help find a solution. They must make themselves available. For example, Section One of this paper shows that single parent families, in general, do not do nearly so well at raising mentally and emotionally healthy children as do two parent families. This fact should influence legislation and procedures from divorce and custody issues to welfare, and other forms of support to single parent families. We can work to prevent family dissolution and to build in compensating factors were family breakdown is inevitable (although studies show that even a stepfather or big brother does not nearly make up for the natural father in the life of children).

Fourth, government leaders must listen and must learn to act based on positive family values. To accomplish things in the public sector requires reasonable compromise, but not to the violation of the public good nor of the leader's integrity. One case in point might be the need for stronger parental consent laws related to teenage sexuality. In Section One we saw that the vast majority of girls who become pregnant during teen years will do so again, unless they adopt different values (not just different methods). Their private lives impact public policy every day in the form of payments and subsidies, as well as the loss of an educated contributor to American life.

Fifth, the executive branch needs to monitor all programs and evaluate them based on their contribution to

the positive development of the family (a family strengths approach). Also, programs which are negative in effect at any level need to be reformed or cut. Someone has to take the initiative to make some hard decisions based on the reality of social facts and traditional family values. This action needs to be taken by people in the executive and legislative branches of government. They need to act based on the research and on the traditional American family values, which have now been proven in practice. Then, their initial action needs to be integrated into the laws and practices of the land.

Sixth, the judiciary, especially the Supreme Court, must weigh every decision within the present social context, but with values that are deeper than the mere socially changeable mores of the moment. Judiciary decisions so affect the interpretation of law and the implementation of programs, that good laws can be frustrated in effect and bad laws can be protected, unless great care and deliberation is given.

Seventh, if we believe any good can come through government programs, we citizens must also act based on social research and biblical values and then take the responsibility to see that all channels of influence and integration are pursued. Family Action councils, lobbyists, and personal involvement are necessary, working together.

Without this coordination and effort, little can be done to turn the direction of present programs around. All of us who are concerned must work and plan together for our nation and for our children's heritage.

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