

Dual-Gender Parenting for Optimal Child Development

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Abstract

All family forms are not equally as helpful or healthful for children. More than two decades of research demonstrate that children do better in a home with a married mother and father. Children in this one family form navigate the developmental stages more easily, are more solid in their gender identities, perform better in academic tasks, have fewer emotional disorders, and become better functioning adults. This conclusion clearly makes a strong case that gender-linked differences in child-rearing are protective for children. Men and women do indeed contribute differently to the healthy development of children.

Introduction

The claim, most recently made by researcher Judith Stacey (quoted in Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), that “the gender of parents only matters in ways that don’t matter” has no basis in science. Dual-gender parenting is the most healthful family form in which to nurture and rear children, a fact that has been evidenced by decades of social science research—beginning with the extensive research on children reared in single-parent families.

The most authoritative evidence on children growing up in single-parent families (most often headed by single mothers) concluded that such children are more likely to suffer abuse, twice as likely to drop out of high school, 1.4 times more likely to be idle (out of school and out of work), 3 times more likely to have a child out of wedlock, and 2.5 times more likely to be teen mothers. If we follow this data further, another picture emerges. For children born out of wedlock and raised by single parents, the chance of living in poverty is 5 times greater than for children who grew up in intact families (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). There is also 2 to 3 times the probability of having psychiatric problems during adolescence (Popenoe, 1996). Lest one might suggest that the lower socioeconomic level in single-parent households alone accounts for such statistics, these conclusions were reached after adjustments for income-related variables such as race, sex, mother’s/father’s education, number of siblings, and place of residence (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Following this one statistic even further, children who are born out of wedlock to single teen mothers are more likely to engage in early sexual activity, which poses a great danger for adolescent health. Adolescents account for more than 25 percent of all sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) nationally; within that statistic, women are twice as likely as men to acquire gonorrhea, chlamydia, and hepatitis. Many STDs generate increased risk of developing certain cancers, becoming infertile, and contracting HIV upon exposure. Tragically, STDs are often passed on by women to their children at birth (Popenoe, 1996).

While it is true that there are cases in which children reared by single parents do well, such cases are the exception rather than the rule. The evidence on the substantial majority of children reared in single-parent homes is very clear: this one family form places children at substantial risks for many negative outcomes (Popenoe, 1996).

Is Dual-Gender Parenting Protective for Children?

There is no fact that has been established by the social science literature more convincingly than the following: All variables considered, children reared in a home with a married mother and father are better served. David Popenoe (1996) summarizes the research nicely when he writes that

social science research is almost never conclusive . . . yet in three decades of work as a social scientist, I know of few other bodies of data in which the weight of evidence is so decisively on one side of the issue: on the whole, for children, two-parent families are preferable to single-parent and step-families. (p. 176)

Research showing that children do better when they are raised by their biological father and mother does not document that all children reared in biological families meet with success, nor does it assert that all children deprived of one parent are doomed to failure (Biller, 1993). Some children still struggle in a dual-gender parent family environment, and some children are contentedly reared to adulthood by a wholly committed single parent. But such exceptions in no way deny the overwhelming findings of robust research that supports dual-gender parenting.

Children navigate the developmental stages more easily, are more solid in their gender identity, perform better in academic tasks at school, have fewer emotional disorders, and become better functioning adults when they are reared by dual-gendered parents. This conclusion is supported further by a plethora of research spanning decades

Dual-Gender Parenting for Optimal Child Development

that clearly demonstrates gender-linked differences in child-rearing that are protective for children. In other words, men and women contribute differently to the healthy development of children.

Children in traditional, dual-gender families are more competent (Baumrind, 1982). Research has repeatedly supported the conclusion that the most effective parenting is both highly expressive and highly demanding (Baumrind, 1991). This highly expressive, instrumental parenting provides children with a kind of communion characterized by inclusiveness and connectedness, as well as the drive for independence and individuality. These essential contributions to the optimum development of children are virtually impossible for a man or woman to make alone (Greenberger, 1994). In addition, children learn about male-female relationships through the modeling of their parents. Dual-gender parental relationships provide children with a model of marriage—the most meaningful relationship that the vast majority of individuals will have during their lifetimes.

Gender Complementarity

Complementarity is readily observable in the different parenting styles of mothers and fathers. Not only are fathers' styles highly complementary to those of mothers, but research indicates that the fathers' involvement in the lives of children is essential for optimal child-rearing. For example, this complementarity is provided by mothers who are flexible, warm, and sympathetic, and fathers who are more directive, predictable, and consistent. Rossi's research (1987) noted that mothers are better able to read an infant's facial expressions, handle with tactile gentleness, and soothe with the use of voice. Fathers tend to emphasize overt play more than caretaking—and this play, which occurs in various forms, appears critical for later development (Yogman, 1982).

The Cabrera, Tamis-LeMonda, Bradley, Hofferth, and Lamb (2000) summary of the research on a father's unique contributions to the healthy development of children is worth quoting at length:

Dual-Gender Parenting for Optimal Child Development

Children may benefit from interacting with two involved parents, and may profit from interacting with people who have different behavioral styles. Some researchers have argued that this stylistic difference is gender based (Popenoe, 1996). Fathers' biological and socially reinforced masculine qualities predispose them to treat their children different than do mothers. For example, fathers are more likely than mothers to encourage their children to be competitive and independent and to take risks. . . .

Fathers' emotional investment in, attachment to, and provision of resources for their children are all associated with the well-being, cognitive development, and social competence of young children even after the effects of such potentially significant confounds as family income, neonatal health, maternal involvement, and paternal age are taken into consideration (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Yogman, Kindlon, & Earls, 1995). In addition, fathers have been found to be important players in the development of children's emotional regulation and control (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997). During middle childhood, paternal involvement in children's schooling in both single-father and two-parent families is associated with greater academic achievement and enjoyment of school by children (Nord, Brimhall, & West, 1997). For both resident and non-resident fathers, active participation in their children's lives, rather than simply the amount of contact, appears to be formatively important (Nord et al., 1997). In adolescence, too, stronger and closer attachments to resident biological fathers or stepfathers are associated with more desirable educational, behavioral, and emotional outcomes (Furstenberg & Harris, 1993). High involvement and closeness between fathers and adolescents, rather than temporal involvement per se, protect adolescents from engaging in delinquent behavior and experiencing emotional distress (Harris, Furstenberg, & Marmer, 1998). Thus, both quantity and quality of father involvement combined into the concept of "positive paternal involvement" result in positive child outcomes. (p. 130)

Dual-Gender Parenting for Optimal Child Development

Not every mother or every father has fully developed all of these specific sex-differentiated characteristics. For example, not all fathers are endowed with a temperament suited for discipline, and not all mothers are endowed with a temperament suited for nurturing. However, most fathers and mothers are vulnerable to these sex-specific talents related to parenting, and societies should support parenting roles that take advantage of these gender-related skills and contributions (Wilcox, 2007). The complementarity of male and female parenting styles is of enormous significance to a child's overall development.

Marissa Diener and colleagues demonstrated that twelve-month-old babies who have a close relationship with their fathers seemed more stress-resistant than those who did not. Babies who had secure relationships with their fathers used more coping strategies than those who did not (Diener, Mangelsdorf, McHale, & Frosch, 2002). Their conclusion has fascinating implications: "there may be something unique to fathers that provides children with different opportunities to regulate their emotions" (Broughton, 2002, p. A1).

Male and female differences also emerge in the ways in which infants are held and the differential ways in which mothers and fathers use touch with their children. Mothers more frequently use touch to calm, soothe, or comfort infants; when a mother lifts her child, she brings the child toward her breasts, providing warmth, comfort, security, and protection. Fathers more often use touch to stimulate or to excite the child; they also tend to hold infants at arm's length in front of them, make eye contact, toss the infant in the air, or embrace the child in such a way that the child is looking over the father's shoulder. Shapiro notes that each of these "daddy holds" underscores a sense of freedom (Shapiro, 1994).

Clarke-Stewart (1980) reported differences in mothers' and fathers' play. Mothers tend to play more at the child's level; they also provide an opportunity to direct the play, to be in charge, and to proceed at the child's pace. Father's play tends to resemble teacher-student relationships—apprenticeships of sorts—and is more rough-and-

tumble. In fact, the lack of this rough-and-tumble play emerges disproportionately in the backgrounds of boys who experience gender-identity disorders (Bem, 1996; Hamer & Copeland, 1994; Rekers, 1995).

Benefits of rough-and-tumble play have appeared in child development areas extending from the management of emotions to intellectual and academic achievement. Interestingly enough, fathers' play is related to the development of socially acceptable forms of behaviors and does not positively correlate with violence and aggression, but rather correlates with self-control. Children who roughhouse with their fathers quickly learn that biting, kicking, and other forms of physical violence are not acceptable. These children also learn how to recognize and manage highly charged emotions in the context of playing with their fathers, and such play provides children with opportunities to recognize and respond to emotions appropriately (Cromwell & Leper, 1994).

Combining his own research with that of others, Parke (1996) concluded that play provides important learning for children, particularly in teaching social competence, and that fathers are more geared to physical play with their children than are mothers. On average, fathers spend a greater proportion of their time with infants engaged in play. Father's play is more physically stimulating and more unpredictable and provides a unique learning environment for the infant child (Parke, 1996).

There are also gender differences in parental approaches to discipline. The disciplinary approach of fathers tends toward firmness, relying on rules and principles. The approach of mothers tends toward more responsiveness, bargaining, and adjustment toward the child's mood and context, and is more often based on an intuitive understanding of the child's needs and emotions of the moment. Gilligan (1994) concluded that the differences between paternal and maternal approaches to discipline are rooted in the fundamental differences between men and women in their moral senses—men stress justice, fairness, and duty based on rules, while women stress understanding, sympathy, care, and helping based on relationships.

Dual-Gender Parenting for Optimal Child Development

The critical contributions of mothers to the healthy development of children have long been recognized. There is no reputable psychological theory or empirical study that denies the critical importance of mothers in the normal development of children. Recent research validates the importance of fathers in the parenting process as well. For example, Pruett (1987) concluded that six-month-old infants whose fathers actively played with them had higher scores on the Bailey Test of Mental and Motor Development. Parke (1981) noted that infants whose fathers spent more time with them were more socially responsive and better able to withstand stressful situations than infants relatively deprived of substantial interaction with their fathers.

A second female cannot provide fathering. In fact, McLanahan and Sandefur (1994) found that children living with a mother and grandmother fared worse as teenagers than did those adolescents living with just a single parent. Biller (1993) has concluded that men who were father-deprived in life were more likely to engage in rigid, over-compensatory, masculine, aggressive behaviors later. His research, based on more than 1,000 separate sources, has demonstrated repeatedly the positive effect of fathers on children and has indicated quite clearly that mothers and fathers are not interchangeable. His research concludes:

- Paternal and maternal differences are stimulating for the infant, as they provide contrasting images via differences in a mother's and father's dress, their movements, and even their voices. Because of these differences, infants may prefer mothers when they want to be consoled or soothed and fathers when they want stimulation.
- These differences are important sources of complementary learning for children.
- Where there are strong parental attachments, infants are at a decided developmental advantage compared to those infants who had only close maternal relationships.

Dual-Gender Parenting for Optimal Child Development

- Fathers who are involved with their children stimulated them to explore and investigate, whereas mothers focused on pre-structured and predictable activities.

Parental relationships seem particularly important for boys during the second year of the child's life, a time when boys become more father-focused. Unlike boys, girls do not seem to have this consistent focus during this developmental period (Biller, 1993).

Biller's (1993) research demonstrates clearly the importance of mothers and fathers to the healthy development of children, not only in their unique maternal and paternal contributions, but also in the complementary nature of those contributions. The following conclusion aptly summarizes his research:

Infants who have two positively involved parents tend to be more curious and eager to explore than those who do not have a close relationship with their fathers. . . . Well-fathered infants are more secure and trusting in branching out in their explorations, and they may be somewhat more advanced in crawling, climbing and manipulating objects. (p. 16)

Pruitt (1993) has summarized the work of Erik Erikson, who noted that mothers and fathers even love differently. The love of fathers is characterized by instrumentality and more expectations, whereas mothers are more nurturing, expressive, and integrative. Mothers nurture, and fathers negotiate. Mothers do negotiate, but typically on the child's level, while fathers negotiate with "an upper hand." Fathers focus on extrafamilial relationships, social skills, and developing friendships. Adolescents who have affectionate relationships with their fathers have better social skills, exude more confidence, and are more secure in their own competencies. When there is a father present in the home, there are also lower incidences of adolescent sexual involvement (Pruett, 1993).

Dual-Gender Parenting for Optimal Child Development

What are the consequences when fathers are not present? Alfred Masser (1989), a psychiatrist at Northside Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia, has noted that children who seek psychiatric help are more often suffering from “father hunger”—the unmet need for a physically and psychologically present, available, involved, caring, and kind father.

Blankenhorn (1995) has concluded that father hunger is the primary cause of the declining well-being of children in our society and is associated with social problems such as teenage pregnancy, child abuse, and domestic violence against women.

Researchers have consistently and overwhelmingly found that fathers are critical for the intellectual, emotional, and social development of children (Popenoe, 1996). From the research, Parke (1996) concluded that fathers are important in helping children to read social cues and to regulate emotions that influence social adjustment to positive peer relationships. Parke noted, “Although there is often overlap between mothers and fathers, this study showed that fathers make a unique contribution independent of the mothers’ contribution to their children’s social adjustment” (p. 139).

Researchers surmise that a father’s expectations regarding future roles for his child have a powerful effect on the child’s cognitive ability (Wardle, 1997). Popenoe’s (1996) review of the research reveals a number of such effects. Father involvement has been linked with superior quantitative and verbal skills, enhanced problem-solving ability, and improved academic achievement in children. The presence of the father in the home also has been shown to be one of the determinants of mathematical proficiency in girls (Popenoe, 1996). And the amount of time fathers spend reading to their daughters has been observed as a strong indicator of the daughters’ verbal ability (Popenoe, 1996). As Popenoe points out, “fathers who are highly committed to child-rearing, have flexible views regarding sex roles for themselves and their children, and express interest, involvement, and encouragement [which] likely will enrich their daughters’ cognitive functioning” (p. 148).

A positively involved father increases the likelihood of a child developing a healthy body image, self-esteem, moral strength, and social competence (Lamb, 1997).

Dual-Gender Parenting for Optimal Child Development

Numerous studies suggest that fathers contribute profoundly to children's development by influencing central components of children's self-identities, self-confidence, and self-regulation (Rekers, 2004). Children with nurturing, involved, and committed fathers are markedly more successful in their academic, athletic, and social activities and have higher self-esteem than do those who suffer from father absence (Rekers, 2004).

Fathers also seem to have an impact on the emotional well-being of their children. Videon (2005) examined the influence of father-adolescent relationships on depression in more than 6,500 boys and girls. She found that higher levels of satisfaction with the father-adolescent relationship correlated with fewer depressive symptoms among both boys and girls.

Using a probability sample of 4,987 adolescents, Dorius, Bahr, Hoffman, and Harmon (2004) examined "the degree to which closeness to [the] mother, closeness to father, parental support, and parental monitoring buffer the relationship between peer drug use and adolescent marijuana use" (p. 163). The researchers concluded that "the relationship between peer drug use and adolescent marijuana use was attenuated by both closeness to father and the perception that parents would catch them for major rule violation" (p. 163).

In a longitudinal study, Harris et al. (1998) followed a cohort of children into adolescence and early adulthood and found that fathers' involvement significantly influenced the economic and educational attainment of youth and resulted in lower rates of delinquency. They also found that fathers' emotional closeness was associated with positive social behavior, less distress, and greater psychological well-being during the transition to adulthood, as well as less premarital adolescent sexual behavior. These effects were independent of the effects of the mothers' influence.

In one of the largest studies of its kind, Wright (2005) retrospectively examined the medical records of 168,113 adolescents who had been treated for more than four years in a national behavioral health provider network. Prior to beginning the treatment,

Dual-Gender Parenting for Optimal Child Development

61 percent of the males and 23 percent of the females were taking psychotropic medication for ADD/ADHD that had been prescribed by a psychiatrist, a pediatrician, or a primary-care physician. The majority of all the adolescents came from single-parent homes; most lacked an effective father figure and/or were exposed to negative and often abusive male role models. Behavioral interventions involved a sympathetic but firm male therapist and the introduction of positive male role models—such as fathers, Big Brothers, coaches, and Sunday school teachers—into the adolescent’s life. Despite the very strict requirements for discontinuing the medication, the results were dramatic. After an average of six therapy sessions with the children, the percentage of boys on medication decreased from 61 percent to 11 percent, and the percentage of girls on medication was reduced from 23 percent to 2 percent.

Another area where both fathers and mothers seem to exert strong influences is the area of gender identity. Children seem to have the best chance of developing healthy sexual identities when they are raised by dual-gender parents (Knight & Daniel, 2005), since both boys and girls form their sex roles from their associations with both genders. Knight and Daniel conclude, “Boys need fathers so they can develop their own sexual identities; they need mothers so they can learn how to interact with the opposite sex” (p. 5). Girls need mothers so they can learn what it is to be a woman; they need fathers so they know how to interact with the opposite sex. Researchers have concluded that fathers have a greater impact on gender role adjustment of both boys and girls than do mothers, because fathers typically emphasize preparing children for their various roles in society (Rekers, 2004).

Through identification and imitation, boys learn from their fathers what they cannot learn from their mothers—how to be a man. The transition from boyhood to manhood is a difficult process; as boys grow up, they must necessarily leave the comforting female protection provided by their mothers. Boys learn through interactions with their fathers about male responsibility, about how to be assertive and self-sufficient, and about how to interact acceptably with members of the opposite sex (Popenoe, 1996).

Dual-Gender Parenting for Optimal Child Development

Girls learn from their fathers how to relate to men and learn about assertiveness, achievement, independence, and heterosexual trust and intimacy (Popenoe, 1996). A positively involved father provides girls with a steady relationship of love and respect from an adult male who will not exploit them, thereby equipping them with a security and trust that helps them avoid precocious sexual involvement and exploitative relations with other males (Rekers, 2004). Girls raised in single-parent homes are more apt to become sexually active and are exceptionally vulnerable to males who treat them poorly (Rekers, 2004).

Mothers are important in providing a sex-role model for their daughters and seem to exert a greater influence in this area of gender role development (Mead & Rekers, 1979). Hart, DeWolf, Wozniak, and Burts (1992) concluded that mothers have strong effects on the development of pro-social behavior such as cooperative peer behavior, which develops when mothers reason with children about the consequences of their actions.

In spite of the overwhelming evidence citing the importance of mothers and fathers to the healthy development of children, attempts have been made in the professional literature to blur the lines between genders and to claim that neither mothers nor fathers are necessary for positive outcomes in children. Such research reports have become increasingly bold with their activist agendas; a good example is the article “Deconstructing the Essential Father,” in which Silverstein and Auerbach (1999) argue that “neither mothers nor fathers are essential to child development and that responsible fathering can occur within a variety of family structures” (p. 397). The authors of the article used the offspring-raising habits of soft-furred, tree-dwelling South American monkeys to support their view that other parenting forms lead to positive child outcomes. They state, “Marmosets illustrate how, within a particular bioecological context, optimal child outcomes can be achieved with fathers as primary caregivers and limited involvement by mothers” (p. 400). Silverstein and Auerbach apparently fail to realize that no animal models approximate the human family, and that rearing a child is significantly more complicated than raising a marmoset.

Dual-Gender Parenting for Optimal Child Development

Moreover, in this author's opinion, the interpretation of such research and its use in advocacy is overwhelmingly influenced by bias. Many of the existing studies that find no difference among children of the various family forms have evident limitations, such as small sample sizes, non-representative and self-selected samples, and reliance on self-reporting, which is subject to social desirability prejudices. The advocates of these studies often downplay these limitations and frequently fail to contemplate the potential importance of having both male and female nurturers and role models (Schumm, 2010).

From the extensive research spanning decades, the importance of mothers to the healthy development of children is irrefutable. Recent research has provided clear and compelling evidence of the importance of fathers to the healthy development of children. The evidence is equally convincing regarding the consequences of father absence and its relationship not only to the severe difficulties in the lives of children, but of its societal costs as well. What is less clear are the consequences of "mother hunger"—one can only imagine.

Conclusion

The research is clear: Mothers and fathers are essential for optimal child-rearing. Hart (1999) has concluded that mothers and fathers contribute in unique, complementary ways to the healthy development of children. Parke's review (2004) of the recent research highlights the evidence that mothers, fathers, and children "influence each other both directly and indirectly" (p. 365). The gender complementarity that results from dual-gender parents affords children the opportunity to thrive in the best possible environment. Other family forms are not equally as helpful or healthful for children, and substantial research demonstrates the negative effects of physical and psychological father absence.

The contribution of gender complementarity to child-rearing is deeply rooted in the innate differences between men and women. Harvard sociologist Pitirim Sorokin (1956) concluded that no society in history has ceased to honor the institution of

Dual-Gender Parenting for Optimal Child Development

marriage—and with it dual-gender parenting—and survived. Traditional marriage and parenting contribute to the fulfillment of life's meaning and to the well-being of both individuals and society in ways that nontraditional forms do not—and cannot.

Regarding gender complementarity and child-rearing, *tradition and science agree: Both mothers and fathers provide optimal development for children. Children's needs must be placed first.* The deliberate placement of children in settings that are motherless or fatherless begins a slippery slope, one filled with risks that neither children, their families, nor society can afford to take.

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Dual-Gender Parenting for Optimal Child Development

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