



## How Fatherlessness Impacts Early Sexual Activity, Teen Pregnancy, and Sexual Abuse

*By Rob Schwarzwald and Natasha Tax*

The pathologies and moral crises of our era do not stand in isolation. They are entwined, inextricably. The pound of flesh demanded by Shylock from Antonio in “The Merchant of Venice” could not be removed without the loss of Antonio’s blood. The veins of the victim, laced throughout his body, were impossible to segregate from the flesh itself. So it is with the intersecting layers of family life, human sexual behavior, public policy, and the well-being of our children.

Certainly among these layers, fatherhood is a theme that weaves throughout them with compelling frequency. Fatherlessness is one of the most important, albeit ignored, social issues of our time. Fathers are portrayed in popular entertainment as pseudo-morons, if they are shown at all. As comedian Stephen Colbert has observed, “America used to live by the motto ‘Father Knows Best.’ Now we’re lucky if ‘Father Knows He Has Children.’ We’ve become a nation of sperm donors and baby daddies.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet fathers are essential to the well-being of their daughters. “Fathers have a direct impact on the well-being of their children ... Girls with involved, respectful fathers see how they should expect men to treat them and are less likely to become involved in violent or unhealthy relationships,” writes Jeffrey Rosenberg and W. Bradford Wilcox in a report published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Administration for Children and Families, “The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children.”<sup>2</sup> Rosenberg and Wilcox also note that, sadly, “children who live in father-absent homes often face higher risks of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect than children who live with their fathers.”

In the following, we document how the absence of fathers in the home promotes dangerous sexual behavior in minor girls and young women and makes them more susceptible to physical and sexual abuse.

### **Sexual Activity and Fatherlessness**

According to a 2003 study of 700 girls, “girls whose fathers left the family earlier in their lives had the highest rates of both early sexual activity and adolescent pregnancy, followed by those whose fathers left at a later age, followed by girls whose fathers were present.”<sup>3</sup> And in another study published in 2008, in which 90 families were observed, “more exposure to father absence was linked to earlier puberty.”<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, a study assessing the factors related to sexual activity of adolescent girls, including age, race, and delinquency, found that father involvement was the only factor that “decreased the odds of engaging in sexual activity and none of the other family processes was found to be statistically significant.”<sup>5</sup>

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Substantial research noted by the Marriage and Religion Research Institute, known as MARRI, indicates that “a girl whose father leaves before she is five years old is eight times more likely to have an adolescent pregnancy than a girl whose father remains in her home.”<sup>6</sup> Additionally, “African-American girls are 42 percent less likely to have sexual intercourse before age 18 if their biological father is present at home.”<sup>7</sup>

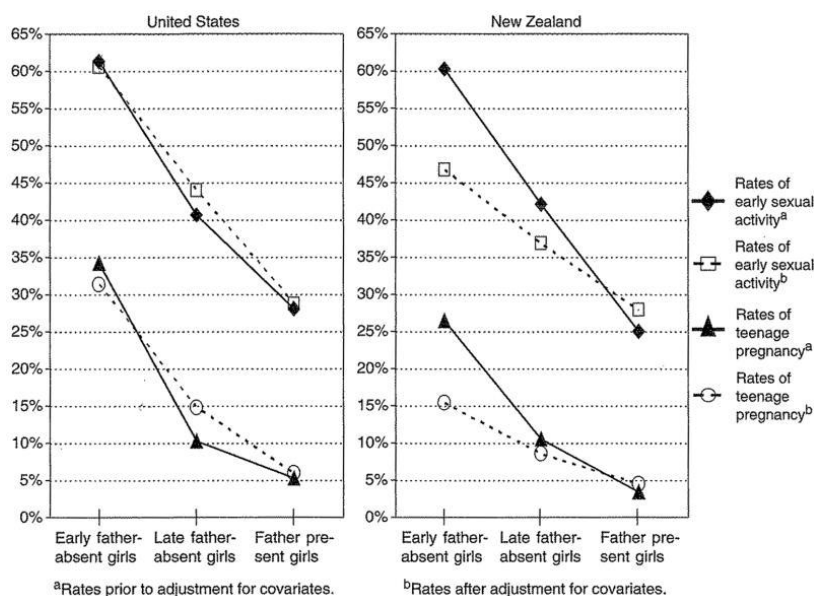
### Teen Pregnancy and Fatherlessness

According to a study conducted by the *Journal of the Human Behavior and Evolution Society*, “Women whose parents separated between birth and six years old experienced twice the risk of early menstruation, more than four times the risk of early sexual intercourse, and two and a half times higher risk of early pregnancy when compared to women in intact families. The longer a woman lived with both parents, the lower her risk of early reproductive development. Women who experienced three or more changes in her family environment exhibited similar risks but were five times more likely to have an early pregnancy.”<sup>8</sup>

Other studies show that “being raised by a single mother raises the risk of teen pregnancy, marrying with less than a high school degree, and forming a marriage where both partners have less than a high school degree.”<sup>9</sup>

### Rates of Early Sexual Activity and Adolescent Pregnancy by timing of Father Absence<sup>10</sup>

The following chart shows that the earlier a father becomes absent in a girl’s development, the more likely she is to engage in sexual activity and become pregnant as a teen.



### Child Abuse and Fatherlessness

Research also indicates that children raised in fatherless households are significantly more likely to suffer from abuse both in their formative years and as adults.

According to MARRI, the 2002 cycle of the National Survey of Family Growth showed that among women aged 38 to 44, ever being forced to have sexual intercourse is least common among those raised in an intact married family.<sup>11</sup>

Data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Study of Child Abuse and Neglect strongly imply that in many cases the absence of a biological father contributes to increased risk of child maltreatment. The situation in which a child has the lowest risk of physical abuse is one in which the biological parents are married and the family has always been intact. Conversely, the risk of abuse is 3.5 times more likely if the child is living in a single parent household. Further, if the parent is cohabitating with another adult, the risk is multiplied by ten.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to putting children at a higher risk of being abused, those raised without fathers are more likely to become abusers themselves. A study by the *Journal of Research on Adolescence* suggests, "Youths in father-absent households still had significantly higher odds of incarceration than those in mother-father families. Youths who never had a father in the household experienced the highest odds."<sup>13</sup>

Further, many women involved in pornography have been sexually abused. According to pornographic actor and producer David Mech:

The female actresses, in my opinion, are all damaged (e.g., histories of sexual or emotional abuse). I know it sounds bad to say that, but that has been my experience after spending over a decade in the industry. I have yet to meet a non-damaged (i.e., no past history of sexual or emotional abuse or trauma) professional (e.g., attorney, doctor, professor) female who left her job to make adult videos.<sup>14</sup>

This argument is sustained by interviews with women who have been in the pornography industry. Consider the case of former pornographic film star Jenna Jameson:

Whenever a new porn starlet appears on The Howard Stern Show, Stern asks her the same biographical question: "Were you molested as a child?" Many of them were, and detail their history of childhood sexual abuse on the air. Some admit to it later. "I lied like a rug," Jenna Jameson wrote in her book, *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star*, of her own appearance on Stern's show. "I didn't want anyone to think that I was in the business because I was a victim."<sup>15</sup>

### **Abortion and Fatherlessness**

Aside from an increase in the likelihood of teen pregnancy and early sexual activity, women who were raised in fatherless homes had significantly higher abortion rates than those women raised by a mother and father.

Research from MARRI shows that among women between the ages of 15-44 who have ever had one or more abortions, 53.3 percent of them were raised in a "not-an-always-intact-family, as opposed to two biological or adoptive parents from birth."<sup>16</sup>

Substantial evidence from MARRI also indicates that women who were raised in a household that included their fathers were less likely to have an abortion in their lifetimes. In a sample set of women who lived with their biological mothers and stepfathers at age 14, 36 percent of them had abortions.<sup>17</sup> In

contrast, of another sample set of women who had lived with their biological mother and father at age 14, only 15.5 percent of them had abortions.<sup>18</sup>

## Conclusion

Fathers are an imperative component of a girl's development. While the Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* implicitly argues that children simply need two parents of any gender, social science disagrees. Even President Obama, who celebrates the redefinition of the family, said in his 2013 Father's Day address, "No matter how advanced we get, there will never be a substitute for the presence of a parent in a child's life, and in some ways that is uniquely true for fathers."<sup>19</sup> This is strikingly odd, given his concurrent affirmation that same-gendered couples rearing children are fully suited as parents.<sup>20</sup>

Research is clear that the lack of a father, especially in a girl's life, increases her likelihood of earlier sexual activity, higher rates in teen pregnancy, devastatingly higher rates in child abuse, and significantly higher rates of abortion. While it is certainly possible for children raised without their fathers to avoid these patterns, social science is clear that fatherhood is essential to a girl's development and that children are put at a clear disadvantage when deprived of a relationship with their fathers.

"We ignore the problem of father absence to our peril," writes Dr. Edward Kruk, Associate Professor of Social Work at the University of British Columbia. "Of perhaps greatest concern is the lack of response from our lawmakers and policymakers, who pay lip service to the paramount importance of the 'best interests of the child,' yet turn a blind eye to father absence, ignoring the vast body of research on the dire consequences to children's well-being."<sup>21</sup>

It's time that the blind eyes of policymakers, parents, and everyone who cares about girls and young women were opened wide.

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<sup>1</sup> "We Can Do Better Than TV Dads Like Homer Simpson," FamilyLife, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://mensteppingup.com/tag/father-knows-best/>.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children*, by Jeffrey Rosenberg and W. Bradford Wilcox (2006), 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> "Absent fathers linked to teenage pregnancies," NewScientist.com, accessed December 10, 2015, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/dn3724-absent-fathers-linked-to-teenage-pregnancies/>.

<sup>4</sup> "Study Sheds Light on Why Girls With Absent Fathers Tend to Go Through Puberty Earlier Than Girls From Intact Families," Innovations Report, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://www.innovations-report.com/hrml/reports/studies/study-sheds-light-girls-absent-fathers-tend-puberty-117883.html>.

<sup>5</sup> National Center for Biotechnology Information, *A Bioecological Analysis of Risk and Protective Factors Associated With Early Sexual Intercourse of Young Adolescents*, Tina Jordahl and Brenda J. Lohman (2009), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2805909/>.

<sup>6</sup> "Effects of Fatherlessness on Children's Development," Marriage and Religion Research Institute, accessed December 10, 2015, <http://downloads.frc.org/EF/EF14K18.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

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- <sup>8</sup> Robert J. Quinlan, "Father absence, parental care, and female reproductive development," *Journal of the Human Behavior and Evolution Society* 24 (2003): 376-90, accessed December 10, 2015, doi: 10.1016/S1090-5138(03)00039-4.
- <sup>9</sup> Jay D. Teachman, "The Childhood Living Arrangements of Children and the Characteristics of Their Marriages," *Journal of Family Issues* 25 (2004): 86-111, accessed December 10, 2015, doi: 10.1177/0192513X03255346.
- <sup>10</sup> Bruce J. Ellis, et al. "Does Father Absence Place Daughters at Special Risk for Early Sexual Activity and Teenage Pregnancy?" *Child Development* 74 (2003): 801-21, accessed December 10, 2015, doi: 10.1111/1467-8624.00569. Chart in its entirety is the work of fellows of the Department of Psychology, University of Canterbury.
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- <sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect*, by Andrea J. Sedlak, et al. (2010), [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nis4\\_report\\_congress\\_full\\_pdf\\_jan2010.pdf](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/nis4_report_congress_full_pdf_jan2010.pdf).
- <sup>13</sup> Cynthia C. Harper and Sara S. McLanahan, "Father Absence and Youth Incarceration," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 24 (2004): 369-97, accessed December 10, 2015, doi: 10.1111/j.1532-7795.2004.00079.x
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- <sup>15</sup> "Porn Stars Molested About as Often as Accountants, New Study Finds," Slate.com, accessed December 10, 2015, [http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx\\_factor/2012/11/28/porn\\_stars\\_and\\_childhood\\_molestation\\_new\\_study\\_says\\_porn\\_actresses\\_are\\_sexually.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2012/11/28/porn_stars_and_childhood_molestation_new_study_says_porn_actresses_are_sexually.html).
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- <sup>17</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> "Weekly Address: Celebrating Father's Day Weekend," YouTube.com, accessed December 10, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dxsdp3r5Dek>.
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