



Why Fatherhood? Why Now?

By Hershel K. Swinger, PhD

*“I used to think it was poverty.
Then I thought it was racism.
I finally decided it was child abuse, or drug abuse.
Now I know it’s about being fatherless.”*

Twentieth-century poet and philosopher George Santayana wrote, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” History is a source of inspiration and of indignation, the breadth of human accomplishments and failures. How did we get to where we were in the early 1990s? How did we find ourselves where we are today?

I USED TO THINK IT WAS POVERTY.

A milestone in the history of the United States’ response to underprivileged families began with the 1935 Social Security Act, which gave us Aid to Mothers with Dependent Children. Astonishingly, married women did not qualify because if their children had a father, surely that father would want to take care of them, would be

able to take care of them. The Social Security Act was designed to keep disadvantaged children from suffering because of poverty. But there were two major flaws with Aid to Mothers with Dependent Children. You were required to remain poor in order to qualify for the grants; and the more children you had, the more money you received. Inadvertently, the system left fathers out of the equation, presenting them as untrustworthy and casting them in a negative light in order to ensure that the funds would continue. The skepticism toward public social services that fathers still feel today was set in motion.

Aid to Mothers with Dependent Children was one of many programs designed to help move the United States out of the Great Depression.

More than 2 million African Americans were on relief in 1933, but between 1935 and 1943, the creation of the Works Progress Administration provided 8 million jobs. Eighty-seven percent of WPA workers were men, and 70 percent of the jobs were unskilled. The program built many public buildings, roads, parks, bridges, and schools. It fed children and redistributed food, clothing and housing. In 1940, the WPA changed policy and began vocational educational training of the unemployed to make them available for factory jobs and the onset of war production.

Leading up to and during World War II, 100 percent of the nation's work force was employed, including women and minorities. Husbands and sons drafted into the military sent home an allotment. Because of working mothers and fathers, for a large percentage of poor families heretofore on public welfare, the need for Aid to Mothers with Dependent Children was eliminated.

The Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights, and other veterans' benefits greatly improved the welfare of children

whose fathers had joined the service. Following World War II, in 1948, the United States military was racially integrated. The nation established the model of a highly productive society that shared and invested its prosperity for a more affluent and more fulfilling future. The idea was to try to make life fair for everyone. Optimism reigned.

THEN I THOUGHT IT WAS RACISM.

In 1954, the Supreme Court unanimously ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. It was a landmark decision, applying the Equal

Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment that overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine that had legalized segregated schools for decades. Segregation had given African American children a false sense of inferiority, self-rejection, and loss of self-esteem, which negatively affected their ability to learn. The ruling changed American public schools forever, paving the way for integration and the civil rights movement.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a historic piece of legislation in the United

"Segregation had given African American children a false sense of inferiority, self-rejection, and loss of self-esteem, which negatively affected their ability to learn."

States that outlawed racial segregation in public places and in employment. Conceived to help African Americans, the bill was amended prior to passage to include women, who officially became minority-class members for the first time. We believed if minority people were included in all aspects of life, things would be better for children overall. The promise was to rid the society of racism.

“Visitation, custody, and financial rights and responsibilities of fathers are determined by the courts, not by the needs of the children.”

In the United States, divorce used to be difficult to obtain, and usually it was impossible without good reason: adultery, abandonment, alcoholism, abuse. In 1970, California enacted a no-fault divorce law that enabled women and men to get out of marriages without having to place blame. While many social and economic factors have conspired to weaken our marriages, no-fault divorce laws pushed us over the edge. Between 1970 and 1996, the number of children living with both parents declined from 85 to 68 percent. During this same period, the proportion of children living with one parent grew from 12 to 28 percent. Today, nine in ten women are awarded physical custody of their children despite the fact that children’s protective services workers

have learned that biological fathers want their children, but the judicial system is reluctant to turn their children over to them without social and/or economic support. Visitation, custody, and financial rights and responsibilities of fathers are determined by the courts, not by the needs of the children.

Somewhere between 1935 and today, the stigma of having sex or a child outside of marriage was removed.

There is no longer any shame or disgrace when unmarried political leaders, professionals, and celebrities blatantly have children. As recently as 1960, three-quarters of African Americans were born to a married couple. Between 1970 and 1992, the proportion of babies born outside of marriage leapt from 11 to 30 percent. In the first two years following a divorce, family income among white children falls about 30 percent; for black children, it falls by 53 percent.

I FINALLY DECIDED IT WAS CHILD ABUSE, OR DRUG ABUSE.

In 1962, Henry Kempe and his colleagues first coined the phrase “battered-child syndrome” and identified it as a clinical condition

in children who have suffered continuous serious physical abuse such as beatings, bruises, scratches, hematomas, burns, or malnutrition.

Battered child syndrome results in life-threatening and sometimes life-extinguishing injury to a child, usually inflicted

by parents,

guardians, or other adult caregivers.

According to

the definition of

battered-child syndrome, children are abused and neglected because of what happened or didn't happen when their parents were caring for them.

In 1975, the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect implemented the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act. First, the term "child abuse and neglect" needed to be defined, followed by a mechanism for addressing it. Early research found that most child abusers were abused themselves as children, repeating the pattern when they grew up and had children of their own. Overdisciplined and deprived of parental love in their infancy, they looked to their own children for what they had missed.

During the 1970s, it was thought that the number of children who were abused and neglected was relatively

small and that their adult caregivers needed to be treated for the emotional problems that caused them to abuse their children. We did not look closely at those who were abused as children and did *not* grow up to abuse their children. Until the 1970s, child abusers

were treated as criminals, and their children were frequently placed in foster care while the

court ordered their parents to receive treatment or to be placed in jail.

We also learned that "the system" was the worst parent of all. Children raised in institutions had the worst outcomes of any at-risk children. Most of the treatment was aimed at women and children because the majority of children in the child protective services system were without fathers. Because of spousal abuse, substance abuse, and sexual abuse, men were viewed as the cause of the problem, despite the fact that about half of the children who entered the system were neglected by their mothers. For a while, mothers who used cocaine bore "crack babies," and that was viewed as the cause of the problem. Cocaine use in pregnancy was treated as a moral issue rather than a health problem, so treatment programs for substance-abusing mothers and their

"Children raised in institutions had the worst outcomes of any at-risk children."

children were established. A number of women abandoned or lost custody of their children, had their parental rights terminated, and were prosecuted and jailed because of their addictions. The methods of treating child abuse and neglect were psychodynamic and/or behavioral. The preferred modality for child abuse and neglect was and is parent-education classes. Groups of adults meet to learn how to appropriately parent their children. This method has had mixed results. In California, traumatized children receive individual therapy from trained mental health professionals. When the numbers of abused children reached millions nationwide, it became profoundly clear that we were very good at identifying and reacting to child abuse and neglect, but we didn't know how to prevent it.

NOW I KNOW IT'S ABOUT BEING FATHERLESS.

Statistical studies began to appear about the outcomes for children who do not have their biological fathers in their lives. According to the FBI, a missing father is a more reliable predictor of criminal behavior than race, environment, or poverty.

Who is going to father our children?

The U.S. Census Bureau reported in 2004 that more than 25 million children lived apart from their biological fathers. That is one out of every three children (34.5 percent) in the United States. Nearly two in three African American children (65 percent) live in father-absent homes. Nearly four in ten Hispanic children (36 percent), and nearly three in ten Caucasian children (27 percent) live in father-absent homes. The United States reportedly leads the world in fatherlessness.

The numbers get worse every year. Substandard public schools are definitely not working; physical and mental health care are inadequate; no one is deterred by state legislatures' stricter criminal sentencing; incarceration, parole, and probation are neither rehabilitative nor threatening. Faith-based and government programs – “wars” on guns, drugs, gangs, violence, teen pregnancy, welfare, and far-flung conflicts – have all been lost. In order to understand our behavior and change our collective thinking, we need to study the past and find a way to correct the future. We must do it for

the sake of the children. The current statistics have been current too long.

From the wild Irish slums of the 19th century Eastern seaboard to the riot-torn suburbs of Los Angeles, there is one unmistakable lesson in American history: a community that allows a large number of young men (and women) to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any set of rational expectations about the future ... that community asks for and gets chaos. Crime, violence, unrest, disorder – most particularly furious, unrestrained lashing out at the whole social structure – is not only to be expected; it is very near to inevitable. And it is richly deserved.”

Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-NY)
“A Family Policy for the Nation,” *America*
September 18, 1965

PROJECT FATHERHOOD

In 1994, we were not yet focusing on men as an integral part of the family when Children’s Institute, Inc. (CII) reached out to fathers and began the process of engaging them in the lives of their children. At the time of Project Fatherhood’s creation, CII was a residential care facility housing 78

infants and toddlers who had been removed from their parents due to child abuse or neglect. With a grant from the Office of Minority Mental Health, we proposed to demonstrate a free program utilizing biological fathers to decrease physical and emotional father absence; to ensure that fathers are emotionally and financially supportive parents; and to help them concentrate on their children’s crucial needs. We wanted to prevent their sons from perpetrating aggression as child abusers, spousal abusers, sexual abusers, drug abusers, and violent gang members by focusing specifically on the relationship between fathers and their children. By increasing the involvement of disadvantaged fathers in the lives and upbringing of their children, those fathers would demonstrate the validity of our model. We hypothesized that if we addressed the factors of stress, separation and loss, child abuse and neglect, poor self-esteem, and intergenerational issues, the fathers would parent their infants and young children in a conscious manner that would maximize the chances of the child growing up to be a healthy individual.

While fatherhood is a near-universal experience for men, there are wide differences in culture, knowledge, and skills that fathers bring to parenting.

Men meet in groups to eliminate the psychological isolation associated with antisocial behavior. Combating shame and disgrace, men feel relief and self-respect when they realize their potential to be fathers. The components of the Project Fatherhood model are Men in Relationships Group, Job Club, children's groups and significant others groups. Through Men in Relationships Group, the fellowship of fathers can make something positive happen by helping their children reach their potential. And if a man is not fulfilling his role as a father, the issues in his background that prevent him from doing so can be resolved. Job Club training reaches out to unemployed fathers struggling with poverty and offers skills, tools, and attitudes that prepare them for employment. Because biological fathers need to be integrated into the whole family as well, the groups for significant others and children mend that bond. Once the family is accepted into CII's Project Fatherhood, they participate for life and are encouraged to come back at any time. If a group becomes too large or has progressed through the five levels of relatedness, the men are encouraged to pair off

“Men meet in groups to eliminate the psychological isolation associated with antisocial behavior.”

with a trained professional and begin a group in their own neighborhood for the benefit, care, and well-being of everyone's children. Our children's group members have demonstrated improved confidence, social skills, and school achievement. While the community can't always find a solution to the economic and human problems facing families, Project Fatherhood groups can be started with the limited resources and the multiple needs of local schools, agencies, or faith-based organizations.

As a method of service delivery that allows fathers to be on a par with counselors who are not traditional therapists, and neither interprets nor confronts group members, Project Fatherhood flies in the face of traditional treatment. By offering peer-to-peer dialogue about issues in members' present and past lives without judgment, labeling or diagnosis, the focus becomes saving the lives of the children by not doing anything to fathers but with them. In fact, the goal of this process is to develop a fellowship of caring adults who relate to one another in a supportive, constructive way, and who can relate to their own children in the same way.

TRAINING

We train professionals to be Project Fatherhood group leaders in a five-day, 40-hour process that replicates the exact program model through which they will take the fathers and significant others. Expecting a typical classroom training experience on day one, people are anxious but prepared to take notes. After being introduced to these unique methods of practicing respect, self-disclosure, and mutuality, defenses are down and the group becomes one, allowing participation by all attendees to experience the group dynamic. By Friday's final training day, future group leaders are describing their experience of the process in very personal and revealing ways:

"It was really good to be able to learn about this new approach for working with fathers who have multiple needs and limited resources. It was a really wonderful opportunity to be able to participate in this training, where the really excellent staff modeled for us the way to do a warm, relationship-based approach that seems to be very effective..."

Denise Johnston

Executive Director

Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents

"The project challenged my thinking

and made me realize that in our mission to serve the poor, to give the poor what the rich can buy, we're able to offer something else, something more, that lifts up what I truly believe our clients really want, which is to live out their role as parent."

Carla Scarr

Valley Family Center

"This effort takes all of us working together and not in a competitive way, but in a way that...this will change the world. I strongly believe that, and that's why I'm here to take the training again. And I thought I knew what I knew, but I've learned even more this time..."

Charlene Meeks

Program Director

California Institute of
Health & Social Services

We believe that all fathers can and do love their children and want the very best for them. Self-motivated fathers can provide a wealth of social capital and demonstrate that despite what they've gone through in their lives, they want to be close to their children. Fathers have the ability to give and accept love, to treat others with love and respect, and to love and respect themselves. When a man fulfills his biological imperative of being a father,

the rest of his life will fall into place, and he will bring to his child and the society at large a more personally successful and productive member.

Children in the United States are at risk, but they have great potential to do well if we can mobilize fathers. To prevent child abuse and neglect, to curb family violence and make families whole, and to secure a decent future for every one of us, we must count on our family members, social service agencies, elected officials, businesses, and anyone who comes into contact with families and children. We are all

in this together and all of us qualify as partners in this community effort. All of us have to for the sake of the children. While they say it takes a village to raise a child, it will take our children and their fathers to raise our village.

“The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Hershel K. Swinger, PhD, is Senior Vice President, Leadership Center, at Children’s Institute, Inc., and founder of CII’s Project Fatherhood program.