

LIFE WITHOUT FATHER

David Popenoe

*David Popenoe, professor of sociology at Rutgers University, is a well-known researcher and writer on the family and former cochair of the Council on Families in America. His 1988 book *Disturbing the Nest: Family Change and Decline in Modern Societies* examines the ways in which the family has become less important in modernized societies. This reading comes from his 1996 book *Life without Father: Compelling New Evidence That Fatherhood and Marriage Are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society*.*

During the last two or three decades, there has been a lively debate about whether fathers and marriage are necessary for the well-being of children. In the early 1990s, the sides were sharply divided, with some lamenting the decline of the nuclear family and others defending single mothers. Since then, however, the lines in the debate have blurred. Some point out that the importance of two parents can be stressed without blaming single mothers. Others argue that new research shows greater than expected negative effects of divorce on children. Not everyone agrees. Popenoe has been criticized for his views and has entered vigorously into the debate.

As you read, pay attention to why Popenoe thinks children need fathers and why he believes a father's influence in the home can help prevent violence. Keep in mind that Popenoe is engaging in a lively debate and is marshaling all the supporting data he can to make his case. Note, too, that he deals with differing views within his own argument. For example, he asks questions (as in paragraph 13) and then spells out his opponents' reasons before countering with reasons of his own.

THE DECLINE OF FATHERHOOD

The decline of fatherhood is one of the most basic, unexpected, and extraordinary social trends of our time. The trend can be captured in a single telling statistic: in just three decades, from 1960 to 1990, the percentage of children living apart from their biological fathers more than doubled, from 17 percent to 36 percent. If this rate continues, by the turn of the century nearly 50 percent of American children will be going to sleep each night without being able to say good night to their dads.

No one predicted this trend, few researchers or government agencies have monitored it, and it is not widely discussed, even today. But its importance to society is second to none. Father absence is a major force lying behind many of the attention-grabbing issues that dominate the news: crime and delinquency; premature sexuality and out-of-wedlock teen births; deteriorating educational

achievement; depression, substance abuse, and alienation among teenagers; and the growing number of women and children in poverty. These issues all point to a profound deterioration in the well-being of children. . . .

FATHERS: ESSENTIAL BUT PROBLEMATIC

Across time and cultures, fathers have always been considered by societies to be essential—and not just for their sperm. Indeed, until today, no known society ever thought of fathers as potentially unnecessary. Biological fathers are everywhere identified, if possible, and play some role in their children's upbringing. Marriage and the nuclear family—mother, father, and children—are the most universal social institutions in existence. In no society has non-marital childbirth been the cultural norm. To the contrary, a concern for the "legitimacy" of children is another cultural near universal: The mother of an illegitimate child virtually everywhere has been regarded as a social deviant, if not a social outcast, and her child has been stigmatized.

At the same time, being a father is universally problematic for men and for their societies in a way that being a mother is not. While mothers the world over bear and nurture their young with an intrinsic acknowledgment and, most commonly, acceptance of their role, taking on the role of father is often filled with conflict, tension, distance, and doubt. Across societies, fathers may or may not be closely engaged with their children, reside with the mother, or see their father role as highly important.

The source of this sex-role difference can be plainly stated. Men are not biologically as attuned to being committed fathers as women are to being committed mothers. Left culturally unregulated, men's sexual behavior can be promiscuous, their paternity casual, their commitment to families weak. Yet in virtually all societies, especially modern societies, both child and social well-being depend on high levels of paternal investment: the time, energy, and resources that fathers are willing to impart to their children.

That men are not perfectly attuned to fatherhood in biological terms is not to say that fathering behavior is foreign to the nature of men. Far from it. Evolutionary scientists tell us that the development of the fathering capacity and high paternal investments in offspring—features not common among our primate relatives—have been a source of enormous evolutionary advantage for human beings. Because human young are more dependent on adults for a longer period of their lives than any other species and human mothers require a great deal of help if their children are to survive, a key to human evolution was the capturing of male effort to the goal of childrearing. It is almost certainly the case that the human family is the oldest social institution, at heart a biological arrangement for raising children that has always involved fathers as well as mothers.

In recognition of the fatherhood problem—that fatherhood is essential but also somewhat problematic—human cultures have realized that sanctions^o are necessary if paternal investments are to be maximized. The main cultural carrier of sanctions is the institution of marriage, a major purpose of which is to hold men to the reproductive pair bond. Simply defined, marriage is a relationship within which a community socially approves and encourages sexual intercourse and the birth of children. It is society's way of signaling to would-be parents of children that their long-term relationship together is socially important. As evidenced by the vows of fidelity and permanence that almost universally are part of the wedding ceremony, an important purpose of marriage is to hold the man to the union. Margaret Mead once said, with the fatherhood problem strongly in mind, that there is no society in the world where men will stay married for very long unless culturally required to do so.

FATHERHOOD AND MARRIAGE

Today, because the great social complexity of modern societies requires longer periods of socialization and dependency for children than ever before, the need for adult investments in children has reached new heights. In order to succeed economically in an increasingly technological society, children must be highly educated. In order to succeed socially and psychologically in an increasingly complex and heterogeneous culture, children must have strong and stable attachments to adults. Nonfamily institutions can help with education, but family and close-kin groups are essential for socioemotional success. Parents and other close relatives are still the persons most likely to have the motivational levels necessary to provide the time and attention that children need to feel loved and special.

Yet at the time when the childrearing task is ever more demanding and male assistance with the task is ever more important, cultural sanctions holding men to marriage and children have dramatically weakened. Marriage, once both sacred and economically essential for survival, is today based solely on the fragile tie of affection for one's mate. And whereas the institution of marriage once legally bound a couple with a high degree of permanence, marriages can now be broken unilaterally on a whim.

The United States has by far the highest divorce rate in the industrialized world. The chance that a first marriage occurring today will end in divorce stands at around 50 percent—by some estimates as high as 60 percent. The chance in the middle of the last century was around 5 percent. In the past three

^osanctions: Rules or other mechanisms (such as social disapproval) that a society uses to encourage members to behave in ways that the society values.

decades alone, the divorce rate has doubled or tripled, depending upon how one calculates it. . . .

There has emerged in the last decade or two a tendency for women to go it alone. It would be nice, many of these women report, if the perfect man came into the picture. But he is not around, so I am going to have a child anyway. . . .

With this kind of cultural acceptance, it is little wonder that the percentage of out-of-wedlock births in America has increased 600 percent in just three decades, from 5 percent of all births in 1960 to 30 percent in 1991.¹ If the percentage keeps climbing at its current rate, 40 percent of all births (and 80 percent of minority births) will take place out of wedlock by the turn of the century.² . . .

THE FATHERHOOD DEBATE

Could it be that the era of fatherhood is at an end, that the fatherhood problem can be resolved by simply getting rid of fathers and perhaps substituting someone or something else in their stead? Is there something new and different about modern societies that makes single parenthood a reasonable option and makes these societies increasingly immune from the age-old proscription against illegitimacy? Have we become so free and individualized and prosperous that the traditional social structures surrounding family life no longer have the importance that they have had in all of human history to date?

Positive answers to these questions have been forcefully argued. The argument contains these key elements:

- Women no longer need men for provision or protection, the traditional male family roles. For provision, most women now have independent access to the labor market; and if they don't, they have access to government-supported welfare programs. For protection, women have the police, and in any event it is usually their male partner from whom they must be protected.
- Both single mothers and their children have been unfairly stigmatized over the generations. This has been grossly unfair to mothers as well as to the children who did absolutely nothing to bring about their plight. Societies today are able, thankfully, to correct this age-old injustice.
- Male-female family life is inherently inequitable, a patriarchal institution wherein men have always dominated women. Men are selfish, irresponsible, psychologically untrustworthy, even intractable. If women are to achieve true equality, therefore, we must find some alternative to the nuclear family.

¹U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Vital Statistics of the United States, 1991*. Vol. 1, *Nativity*. Washington, DC: GPO, 1993. Among blacks, the increase has been from 23% to 68%.

²Congressional testimony of Lee Rainwater, Harvard University. Cited in William J. Bennett. 1994. *The Index of Leading Cultural Indicators*. New York: Simon and Schuster, p. 47.

- Men frequently leave their wives and children in the lurch, especially in times of crisis, either through psychological withdrawal or outright desertion. It is safer for a woman never to begin counting on a man.
- It is not clear that fathers any longer provide something unique to their children. There is not much they do that mothers do not, or cannot, do just as well.

There is some truth, of course, to each of these points. Many women today are perfectly capable, in economic and other terms, of raising children by themselves. The traditional stigma against illegitimacy is something that few people want to bring back. There does seem to be some kind of inherent inequality between men and women, if nothing more than that men are bigger and stronger and more aggressive. The selfish, irresponsible male is not uncommon. And since some fathers and mothers do carry out the same childrearing activities, the question of why we need both is a reasonable one to ask.

But the aim... is to try to convince you that this no-father argument is fundamentally wrong. If we continue down the path of fatherlessness, we are headed for social disaster.

FATHERS AND MOTHERS

... In my many years as a functioning social scientist, I know of few other bodies of evidence whose weight leans so much in one direction as does the evidence about family structure: On the whole, two parents—a father and a mother—are better for the child than one parent.³

There are, to be sure, many complicating factors to the simple proposition that two parents are best. Family structure is only a gross approximation of what actually goes on within a family. We all know of a two-parent family that is the family from hell. A child can certainly be well-raised to adulthood by one loving parent who is wholly devoted to that child's well-being. But such problems and exceptions in no way deny the aggregate finding or generalization...

What does the social science evidence about family structure and child well-being actually show? Researchers Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur recently examined six nationally representative data sets containing over twenty-five

³It should be noted that social science evidence is never conclusive, on this or any other matter we will be taking up in this book. The world is too complex; the scientific method can only imperfectly be applied to the study of human beings; researchers have biases; and people may not always be telling investigators the truth. These are but a few of the many problems endemic to the social sciences. The best use of the social science evidence is to help confirm or disconfirm. Does the evidence generally support a proposition or not? If it does, fine; if it does not, one had better have a good explanation as to why that proposition may still be true.

thousand children from a variety of racial and social-class backgrounds. Their conclusion:

Children who grow up with only one of their biological parents (nearly always the mother) are disadvantaged across a broad array of outcomes... they are twice as likely to drop out of high school, 2.5 times as likely to become teen mothers, and 1.4 times as likely to be idle—out of school and out of work—as children who grow up with both parents.⁴

Sure, you may say, that is because one-parent families are poorer. But here is the researchers' conclusion about the economic factor:

Loss of economic resources accounts for about 50 percent of the disadvantages associated with single parenthood. Too little parental supervision and involvement and greater residential mobility account for most of the rest.⁵

Many other researchers... have come up with similar conclusions. The evidence covers the full range of possible effects, from crime to school achievement. Social analysts William A. Galston and Elaine Ciulla Kamark report, for example, that

The relationship [between family structure and crime] is so strong that controlling for family configuration erases the relationship between race and crime and between low income and crime. This conclusion shows up again and again in the literature.⁶

Based on such evidence, a strong case can be made that paternal deprivation, in the form of the physical, economic, and emotional unavailability of fathers to their children, has become the most prevalent form of child maltreatment in America today.

THE UNIQUENESS OF FATHERS

What is unique about fathers when compared to mothers? Studies show that virtually all children clearly distinguish a mother role from a father role, even if some contemporary adults do not seem to be able to.⁷ Fathers and mothers differ, just as males and females differ. Part of the reason is cultural, to be sure, but only part. Inborn biology is also a major contributor...

⁴Sara S. McLanahan. 1994. "The Consequences of Single Motherhood." *The American Prospect* 18:48-58, esp. 49.

⁵McLanahan. *Consequences*, p. 52.

⁶Elaine Ciulla Kamark and William A. Galston. 1990. *Putting Children First: A Progressive Family Policy for the 1990s*. Washington, DC: Progressive Policy Institute, pp. 14-15.

⁷Henry B. Biller. 1993. *Fathers and Families: Paternal Factors in Child Development*. Westport, CT: Auburn House.

Across all cultures, the "natural and comfortable" way most males think, feel, and act is fundamentally different from the way most females think, feel, and act. Differences between men and women have been found universally with respect to four behavioral/psychological traits: aggression and general activity level; cognitive skills; sensory sensitivity; and sexual and reproductive behavior.⁸ Perhaps the greatest difference is in aggression and activity level. Almost from the moment of birth, boys tend to be more aggressive and in general to have a somewhat higher activity level than girls....

How do the inherent male-female differences express themselves in dissimilar fathering and mothering behaviors? In dealing with infants, there is an enormous and obvious difference that stems from the woman's having carried the child in utero and from her ability to breast-feed. But beyond that, as Alice Rossi has noted based on an accumulating body of evidence, "In caring for a nonverbal, fragile infant, women have a head start." They are more able to read an infant's facial expressions, handle with tactile gentleness, and soothe with the use of voice.⁹ With toddlers, while women provide comfort and emotional acceptance, men typically are more active and arousing in their nurturing activities, fostering certain physical skills and emphasizing autonomy and independence.

Even with older children the father's mode of parenting is not interchangeable with the mothers. Men typically emphasize play more than caretaking, and their play is more likely to involve a rough-and-tumble approach.¹⁰ In attitude and behavior, mothers tend to be responsive and fathers firm; mothers stress emotional security and relationships, and fathers stress competition and risk taking; mothers typically express more concern for the child's immediate well-being, while fathers express more concern for the child's long-run autonomy and independence.

The importance of these different approaches for the growing child should not be underestimated. All children have the need for affiliation with others but also the drive to go off on their own, to be independent. They need both the personal security brought by strong social ties ("roots") and the push away from the group toward eventual autonomy ("wings"). They need a parent who

- Eleanor E. Maccoby and Carol N. Jacklin. 1974. *The Psychology of Sex Differences*. Palo Alto, Stanford University Press.
- J. Archer and B. Lloyd. 1985. *Sex and Gender*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Robert Pool. 1994. *Eve's Rib: Searching for the Biological Roots of Sex Differences*. New York: Crown.
- Alice Rossi. 1987. "Parenthood in Transition: From Lineage to Child to Self-Orientation." Pp. 69-87 in Jane B. Lancaster, Jeanne Altmann, Alice Rossi, and Lonnie R. Sherrod, eds., *Parenting in the Life Span: Biosocial Dimensions*. New York, NY: Aldine de Gruyter, p. 69.
- M. W. Yogman. 1982. "Development of the Father-Infant Relationship." Pp. 221-280 in H. E.wald, B. M. Lester, and M. W. Yogman, eds., *Theory and Research in Behavioral Pediatrics I*. New York: Plenum Press.
- J. L. Roopnarine and N. S. Mounts. 1985. "Mother-Child and Father-Child Interaction." *Early Child Development Care* 20:157-169.

says "strive, do better, challenge yourself," along with one who comforts them when they fall short.

For boys in modern societies, in order to counterbalance a common behavioral tendency, it is important, if they are to excel in life, to stress affiliation with family and community. For girls, for the same reason, it is important to stress independence. But for both sexes the resolution and balancing of these forces is one of the key components of maturation and personal achievement.

Certainly in a pinch, men and women, fathers and mothers, can play each other's parts in the script of life. Indeed, people can be taught to do almost anything. But most men and women are not predisposed or well-motivated to take on even temporarily the behavior and attitudes of the other sex. And most children want and need and can easily detect the real thing. Fatherless children are therefore at a distinct psychological disadvantage, as a growing body of evidence attests.

THE UNATTACHED MALE

Apart from enhancing children's lives, there are other good reasons why it is important for men to be engaged in parenting. One socially crucial reason is contained in this caveat: Every society must be wary of the unattached male, for he is universally the cause of numerous social ills. The good society is heavily dependent on men being attached to a strong moral order centered on families, not only to help raise children but to discipline their own sexual behavior and to reduce their competitive aggression.

Family life is a considerable civilizing force for men. It is not uncommon to hear men say, for example, that they will give up certain deviant or socially irresponsible behavior only when they have children, for then they feel the need to set a good example. Long ago the great sociologist Emile Durkheim noted that married men experience a "salutary discipline"; marriage forces men to master their passions, but it also encourages the regular work habits and self-sacrifice required to meet the family's material needs.¹¹

A high proportion of male criminals are unattached. Unattached men are more likely to behave criminally and violently than attached men; they are also more likely to die prematurely through disease, accidents, or self-neglect....

So even those who disagree that fathers are essential to sound childrearing and feel sanguine about unmarried women taking on the task by themselves still should worry about how the men left out will be spending their time. Do we really want a society filled with single men, unattached to children, leading self-aggrandizing and often predatory lives?

¹¹ Emile Durkheim. 1951. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. New York: Free Press.

JUVENILE DELINQUENCY AND VIOLENCE

Of all the negative consequences of fatherlessness, juvenile delinquency and violence probably loom largest in the public mind. There are too many little boys with guns. A 550 percent increase in reported violent crime has occurred since 1960, while the population has gone up by only 41 percent. The segment of the population with the fastest-growing crime rate is juveniles. Serious violent crime used to be an adult phenomenon, but arrests of juveniles for murder went up by 128 percent between 1983 and 1992. A study of the officially recorded criminality of two groups of Philadelphia boys, those born in 1945 and those born in 1958, found that the later group was three times more likely to commit violent crimes and five times more likely to commit robberies.¹² Killers and killed alike are younger than ever.

One can point to many recent changes in our society that have fed this outburst of violence among juveniles, including the lethal combination of guns and drugs in our inner cities, the decline of low-skilled jobs, and the violent themes of popular culture. But behind it all there lurks the strong probability that a key underlying cause is the rapid growth of fatherlessness. Many people have an intuitive presumption that fatherlessness must be related to delinquency and violence, and based on the research that has been conducted, the weight of evidence strongly buttresses that presumption. Juvenile delinquency and violence are clearly generated disproportionately¹³ by youths in mother-only households and in other households where the biological father is not present.¹³

What is the evidence? First, there are large-scale studies of statistical association. A statistical review of fifty major studies on the effects of family structure on delinquency concluded that "the effect of intact versus 'broken' families is a consistent and real pattern of association" . . . the prevalence of delinquency in broken homes is 10-15 percent higher than in intact homes."¹⁴ Similarly, a review of all significant studies of the impact of divorce on children conducted

¹³disproportionately. Popenoe makes another statistical point here: that the percentage of juvenile delinquents coming from mother-only households represents a higher (and therefore "disproportionate") percentage of the total number of juvenile delinquents than might be expected, given the percentage of mother-only households in the population. "pattern of association: Though delinquency and broken families seem to be associated, it is not clear that one causes the other.

¹⁴Paul E. Tracy, Marvin E. Wolfgang, and Robert M. Figlio. 1990. *Delinquency Careers in Two Birth Cohorts*. New York: Plenum Press.

¹⁵We do not have the evidence to demonstrate conclusively that fatherlessness is a major cause of increased delinquency and violent behavior among adolescents and young adults. Given the complexities of the issue, fully conclusive evidence will probably never exist. Nevertheless, the current evidence is substantial and convincing.

¹⁶L. Edward Wells and Joseph H. Rankin. 1991. "Families and Delinquency: A Meta-Analysis of Impact of Broken Homes." *Social Problems* 38(1):71-93 (p. 87).

in the past few decades found that "research on antisocial behavior consistently illustrates that adolescents in mother-only households and in conflict-ridden families are more prone to commit delinquent acts."¹⁵

Comparable findings come from the National Surveys of Children, a major longitudinal study done in two waves. The study found that family disruption "was associated with a higher incidence of several behavior problems, negative effects being greatest with multiple marital transitions."¹⁶ The behavior problems included depression/withdrawal, antisocial behavior, impulsive/hyperactive behavior, and school behavior problems. One important finding was that a child living with a custodial parent of the opposite sex is especially prone to problem behavior. Given the makeup of most single-parent families, this applies mainly to boys living with their mothers.

Reviewing all such studies, criminologists Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi concluded in their influential work *A General Theory of Crime* that "in most (but not all) studies that directly compare children living with both biological parents with children living in 'broken' or reconstituted homes, the children from intact homes have lower rates of crime."¹⁷ The findings of the large-scale social surveys are corroborated by^o those of so-called ecological studies that examine the association of factors in particular areas of cities or geographic regions. From such studies, Gottfredson and Hirschi concluded that "such family measures as the percentage of the population divorced, the percentage of households headed by women, and the percentage of unattached individuals in the community are among the most powerful predictors of crime rates."¹⁸

Sixty percent of America's rapists, 72 percent of adolescent murderers, and 70 percent of long-term prison inmates come from fatherless homes.¹⁹ ... This is no statistical artifact. Fathers are important to their sons as role models. They are important for maintaining authority and discipline. And they are important in helping their sons to develop both self-control and feelings of empathy toward others, character traits that are found to be lacking in violent youth.

Unfortunately, the die for the near future has already been cast. The teenage population is expected to rise in the next decade by as much as 20 percent.

^ocorroborated by: Reinforced by.

¹⁵David H. Demo and Alan C. Acock. 1988. "The Impact of Divorce on Children." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 50(3):619-648 (p. 639).

¹⁶James L. Peterson and Nicholas Zill. 1986. "Marital Disruption, Parent-Child Relationships, and Behavior Problems in Children." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 48(2):295-307 (p. 295).

¹⁷Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi. 1990. *A General Theory of Crime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, p. 103.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 103. See also Robert J. Sampson. "Urban Black Violence: The Effect of Male Joblessness and Family Disruption." *American Journal of Sociology* (1987) 93:348-382.

¹⁹Data provided by the National Fatherhood Initiative.

even more for minority teenagers, as the children of the baby boomers grow up. This has prompted criminologist James Fox to assert: "There is a tremendous crime wave coming in the next 10 years." It will be fueled not by old, hardened criminals but by what Fox calls "the young and the ruthless"—children in their early and mid-teens who are turning murderous. In 1993 there were 3,647 teenage killers; by 2005 he expects there will be 6,000 of them.²⁰ If fatherlessness continues to increase, we face even more dangerous times ahead. . . .

There is strong evidence that tendencies toward antisocial behavior first emerge in childhood and are relatively stable across the stages of life into adulthood.²¹ This is especially true of male aggressiveness. Most adult criminals, in other words, manifested antisocial tendencies already in childhood (that is not to say that all antisocial children become adult criminals). . . .

Which childhood experiences are most important? Family, neighborhood, peer group, and popular culture all play some role. General agreement exists within the social science community, however, that antisocial behavior in children is heavily a product of the socialization and social control processes employed by parents. James Q. Wilson, one of America's leading criminological experts, attests: "A large body of data has demonstrated beyond much doubt the powerful effect on aggressiveness and delinquency of being raised in a family that is discordant, lacking in affection, or given to inappropriate disciplinary practices."²²

In their recent reanalysis of the pioneering data set first collected in the late 1930s and early 1940s by Sheldon and Eleanor Glueck of the Harvard Law School, researchers Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub found strong corroborating evidence for the importance of early childhood experiences. The Gluecks' data set, designed to uncover the causes of delinquency and adult crime, compared the life course from childhood to adulthood of five hundred delinquents with five hundred nondelinquents, all of whom were white males who grew up in the Boston slums. The Gluecks collected data from a wide variety of sources, including teacher reports, psychiatric interviews, health and welfare records, employer assessments, and extensive interviews with the subjects and their families. Sampson and Laub reached this conclusion: "Low levels of parental supervision, erratic, threatening, and harsh discipline, and weak parental attachment were strongly and directly related to delinquency."²³

A recent authoritative report entitled *Violence*, prepared by the Panel on the Understanding and Control of Violent Behavior of the National Research

²⁰ Quoted in Joe Urschel, "Expert Seeks Classroom of Millions," *USA Today*, April 11, 1995, p. 1.

²¹ Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub. 1992. "Crime and Deviance in the Life Course." *Annual Review of Sociology* 18:63-84.

²² James Q. Wilson. 1991. *On Character*. Washington, DC: AEI Press, p. 59.

²³ Robert J. Sampson and John H. Laub. 1993. *Crime in the Making*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 247.

Council, summarizes what we now know: "Researchers have identified many correlates and antecedents of aggressive childhood behavior that are presumed to reflect psychosocial influences [including] early family experiences: harsh and erratic discipline, lack of parental nurturance, physical abuse and neglect, poor supervision, and early separation of children from parents."²⁴ The report continues: "Numerous studies show that violent offenders tend to come from certain types of family backgrounds. In particular, they tend to have been subjected to physical punishment, they tend to have alcoholic or criminal parents, and they tend to have disharmonious parents who are likely to separate or divorce."²⁵

Where do fathers fit into this picture? A major contribution of involved fathers, according to researchers, is to teach their children two key character traits: self-control and empathy. People with antisocial and criminal tendencies lack both of these traits; that is, they "tend to be impulsive, insensitive, physical (as opposed to mental), risk-taking, short-sighted, and nonverbal, and they will tend therefore to engage in criminal and analogous acts."²⁶

The lack of self-control in adulthood is closely associated with the absence of powerful and necessary "inhibiting forces" in early childhood, forces which can now be identified with some clarity following several decades of intense study by social scientists.²⁷ These inhibiting forces consist of parental child-rearing practices which are able "to set clear rules, to monitor behavior, and to make rewards contingent on good behavior and punishment contingent on bad behavior."²⁸ The development of empathy in children, in turn, is strongly associated with childrearing approaches that involve reasoning with children (rather than disciplining without reasoning), teaching about the consequences of their actions on others, and eschewing authoritarian and/or harsh disciplinary methods.²⁹

It is entirely possible, of course, for a single mother to follow these childrearing practices and bring up children who possess a high degree of social control and empathy, but it is certainly more difficult for one parent than for two.

²⁴ Albert J. Reis, Jr., and Jeffrey A. Roth, eds. 1993. *Understanding and Preventing Violence*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, p. 105.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 368.

²⁶ Gottfredson and Hirschi. 1990, p. 90.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 255.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 68.

²⁹ Nancy Eisenberg and Paul H. Mussen. 1989. *The Roots of Prosocial Behavior in Children*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. For the development of both self-control and empathy, in addition, it is important for children to be strongly "attached" to their parents, to regard their parents with love and respect, and for the children's parents to be good role models (and especially not be criminals themselves!).