

**Title:** The Father Factor

**Description:** Children from father-absent homes fare worse, on average, across every measure of academic, economic, psychological, social, emotional, and behavioral well being compared to their peers who have involved, responsible, and committed fathers in their lives. Roland C. Warren, president of National Fatherhood Initiative, the United States of America's premier fatherhood organization, will share the latest research and insights about the unique and irreplaceable role that fathers play in the lives of their children. He will share strategies that have been used in the U.S. to rebuild families and communities by connecting fathers to their children, heart to heart.

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Beunos días! Me llamo Roland Warren, el presidente del National Fatherhood Initiative. Muchas gracias por su invitacion, y por esta oportunidad de hablar con ustedes hoy. Desafortunadamente, no hablo español, así que mi discurso está en ingles.

When I heard about the work that the Family Institute of Sabana University is doing, I was very impressed and very encouraged.

National Fatherhood Initiative has worked for 12 years in the United States to end father absence and renew the institution of fatherhood in America.

But I have always known that the problem of father absence was never just an American problem. Today, we are witnessing, worldwide, the devastating impact of fatherlessness on children and on societies. Father absence and its affects know no borders. The pain that children feel from growing up without Dad translates into every language, in every culture. Abandonment, *abandono*, is a universal language.

On the other hand, the joy that children experience when they have an involved, responsible, and committed father in their life can be experienced from Boston to Bogotá, from Barcelona to Beijing.

That is the hope and possibility, and it is the reason NFI does its work. I would imagine it is the same reason that the Family Institute of Sabana University does its important work to strengthen families. And that is why we are all gathered together today – to make a difference in the lives of our children so they can experience the joy of having an involved, responsible, and committed father in their life.

So, what is father absence and why do good fathers make a difference?

<click to father absence data slide>

In the United States, about 24 million children, one out of every three, live in a home without their *biological* father. This chart shows children living without a biological, adoptive, or step-father. As you can see, this did not happen overnight. This was a slowly building trend that was hard to detect year to year, but has amounted to a crisis for American children.

This is the most obvious form of father absence – the *physical* absence of a father from a child's home. But fathers need to be physically, emotionally, *and* spiritually involved in their children's lives. They need to provide, nurture, and guide their children.

Therefore, it is often other forms of father absence that affect our children. Many fathers are *emotionally* or *spiritually* absent from their children's lives. In the US, many suburban fathers work 70 or 80 hours per week, and do not see their kids enough. All of these forms of father absence feel the same to children.

<click to marriage rate data slide>

Linked to this increase in father absence has been a decrease in marriage. In the United States, marriage rates have declined steadily since the 1960s. In 1960, about 69% of all American adults were married. In 2004, only 57% of all adults were married. Again, this was a trend that did not happen overnight, but slowly and steadily snuck up on the US.

<click to father absence and marriage data slide>

This dramatic drop in the marriage rate, and a dramatic rise in the divorce rate, has coincided with the dramatic increase in father absence in America. Looking at the last two charts together, we see that as marriage declines, so does the presence of fathers in children's lives. Fatherhood and marriage are intimately linked. The best predictor of the quality of the relationship a father will have with his children is the quality of the relationship he has with the mother of his children.

Marriage, as an institution, is the best societal “glue” we have to connect fathers to their children, heart to heart. It aligns the interests of mothers and fathers in the best interests of their children. So when marriage breaks down, it becomes much more difficult for fathers to maintain long-term, close relationships with their children.

While single motherhood has become more accepted in America, few have questioned whether or not it is good for children. Certainly, many single mothers do a great job raising their children. So, can single mothers raise children by themselves? Yes. Should they have to? Certainly not. Looking merely at poverty data, single mothers are the group in America most likely to live in poverty.

Even in U.S. families *where a single mother works*, 25% of children living in these working single-mother families are poor. Single mothers struggle, their children struggle, and the fathers of their children are too often marginalized members of society as well. They do not have the stabilizing force of marriage and fatherhood in their lives, forces which tend to encourage men to seek better and more stable jobs, have better health, and to become other-centered individuals, focused on the needs of family and community.

While father absence and its array of consequences has taken firm root in the U.S., the data would suggest that it is just beginning to emerge as a challenge problem here in Latin America. Father absence did not happen overnight in the United States. When the warning signs began to appear, we didn't

urgently respond although we had time to react to reverse the trend. I hope my talk today, if it accomplishes anything, will inspire you to heed the warning signs that have begun to appear in Latin America.

<click to Latin America data slide>

World Bank data from the late 1980s until 1998, the last year for which there is detailed data, reveals a menacing trend. Looking at data for **urban** areas from a sample of countries in Latin America - Colombia, Chile, Venezuela, Argentina, and Costa Rica - shows **significant increases in the proportion of single mother homes**.

In these countries, there have been 17.6, 16.7, 33.9, 37.9, and 20 percent increases, respectively, in single mother homes in a 10 year period. Assuming that these trends have continued at the same rate *since* 1998, we are looking at countries where, today, nearly 1 in 5 households with children are single mother households. Similar patterns are developing across Latin America.

As one who knows this issue well from a US perspective, I can tell you, this is not a good trend for Latin America's children... It was during the early 1980's that the United States was seeing the kinds of numbers that countries across Latin America are seeing today, and by the early 1990's, America was at a crisis point in fatherlessness.

Why? Because, on average, father absence has negative consequences on children.

<click to “Father Factor” slide>

National Fatherhood Initiative recently produced a book which you can get at our website, [www.fatherhood.org](http://www.fatherhood.org), called “The Father Factor: How Father Absence Affects Our Youth.” The Father Factor is a compilation of the most recent academic and government research on the impact of fatherlessness across various measures of child well being, including health, poverty, behavior, substance abuse, child abuse, sexual activity, and crime.

The research shows that across every measure of academic, emotional, physical, and economic well being, children who grow up without fathers are, on average, more likely to suffer negative outcomes in life.

Let me give you some you some examples.

Poverty. In the United States, children from father-absent homes are 5 times more likely to live in poverty than those growing up with two parents. The poverty rate for children less than 6 years old living in single mother families was 48.6 percent in 2002. For children less than 6 years old living with their married parents, the poverty rate was only 9.7 percent.

<click to prison population slide>

Crime. This is one of the most devastating results of father absence, especially for boys. About 2.1 million people are incarcerated in state and federal prisons in the United States, a number that has increased dramatically over the past twenty years. A majority of these prisoners are men – 93% of them – and a majority of them, nearly 60%, are fathers. And a vast majority of men in prison grew up without their fathers – some estimates put it at 70% for violent criminals.

<click to father absence and incarceration slide>

As you can see from this chart, the growth in the prison population and the growth in father-absence have trended together very closely since 1980.

Fatherless boys lack the model they need to show them how to control aggression and how to become responsible adults. It's worth noting, however, that the fastest growing prison population in America is young girls and women, many of whom are growing up without their fathers.

One study shows that even after controlling for income, youths in father-absent households still had significantly higher odds of incarceration than those in mother-father families. Youths who have never had a father in the household experienced the highest odds of incarceration.

<click to Father Factor slide>

Let's look at physical health. Maternal and child health around the time of the birth of a child are significantly affected by the presence or absence of a father. Babies born to unmarried mothers are more likely to have a low birth-weight. Infant mortality rates are 1.8 times higher for infants of unmarried mothers.

Low birth weights and infant mortality are intimately tied to how often the mother seeks prenatal care. Studies in the Father Factor also show that unmarried mothers are less likely to obtain prenatal care. The chances that a mother will breastfeed her baby also decrease when fathers are not involved or educated about breastfeeding.

What about education? Simply put, good fathers help children do well in school. In one study, half of all children with highly involved fathers in two-parent families reported getting mostly A's through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, compared with only 35% of children in nonresident father families. Another study found that students living apart from their biological father are twice as likely to repeat a grade. Also, students not living with both of their biological parents were about twice as likely to get in trouble for misconduct at school.

Father absence also impacts the risk of substance abuse among our children. Research at Columbia University in New York City found that children living in two-parent households with a *poor relationship* with their father are 68% more likely to smoke, drink, or use drugs compared to all teens in two-parent

households. Teens in single-mother households fared much worse. They had a 30% higher risk than those in *all* two-parent households.

Sexual activity. Unmarried teen pregnancy has become a serious problem in the United States. Thirty-four percent of young women become pregnant at least once before they reach the age of 20 and most of them are not married. But there has been some progress made in the last decade. The overall teen pregnancy rate has steadily declined and the rates for African American and white girls have decreased dramatically. Unfortunately, the decrease has been much smaller for Latinas living in the United States. About ½ will become unmarried mothers by the time that they are 20 years old.

How does fatherhood affect teen pregnancy? Data from the Father Factor shows that girls who grow up in a father absent home are *7 times* more likely to become unmarried teen mothers.

All of this data, as a whole, tells us a story.

There is a theme that connects many societal problems that our children face in society - father absence. I know this first hand because I grew up without my father. I know what it's like to long for the love and support of one who should love and support you like no other. Kids have a hole in their soul, in the shape of their dads... I believe that God puts it there. And, if a father is unable or unwilling to be there for his children, it creates a tremendous sense of loss and a unique pain. That's why it is so important... the work that we

do at the National Fatherhood Initiative... It's about hope and possibilities...the hope and possibilities that I spoke about earlier. While it is important to talk about the negative consequences of father absence, we should not forget about the empowerment, confidence, and hope that good fathers brings to their children

And that leads to a discussion of what good fathers can do when they are present.

But before we get to the data, let's take a look at one of the positive effects of father involvement.

<click to Dance PSA>

<Click to NFI logo>

One of the things that this public service advertisement shows us is that fathers bring something unique to the parenting equation. In other words, fathers are not just "another set of hands." Moms and dads parent differently, so it is not just a question of "more hands," but two sets of hands that provide different the opportunity for child development to be more complete.

Research has shown that, on average, fathers tend to relate more physically with their children, while mothers tend to relate more verbally. Fathers tend to play with their kids and engage in cooperative or competitive games and activities with their children, while mothers tend to be more likely to talk with their children or engage in nurturing behavior such as hugging, praising,

or cuddling. And children need both of these approaches. The father's approach challenges kids to test themselves, encourages teamwork, and encourages them to take controlled risks. The mother's approach helps children become verbally adept and in tune with others' emotions.

Even at the earliest stages in a child's life, the difference in styles between moms and dads has a positive influence on the cognitive and emotional development of children. Studies have found that when looking at the way moms and dads approach an infant, mothers tend to be more deliberate and predictable, approaching the baby the same way each time and picking the child up in the same way. Fathers on the other hand tend to approach their baby in unpredictable ways, sneaking up on the infant or coming at her from different angles and picking her up in different ways. This has enormous cognitive advantages for infants and stimulates their brains in unique and needed ways.

There is also some raw data on the positive influence of dads, which can be placed into three main categories – first, better school performance; second, better emotional health; and third, avoidance of high risk behavior.

According to a landmark study by the United States Department of Education called "Students Do Better When Their Fathers are Involved at School," children whose fathers were highly involved were more likely to do well academically, to participate in extracurricular activities, and to enjoy school, and were less likely to have ever repeated a grade or been expelled compared

to children whose fathers were less involved in their schools. This effect held for both two-parent and single-parent households, and was distinct and independent from the effect of mother involvement.

Studies have also found that children with involved fathers exhibit higher levels of empathy, self-esteem, and other pro-social behaviors, even at very young ages.

For example, a study found that higher levels of father involvement in activities with their children, such as eating meals together, helping with homework, and going on family outings, has been found to be associated with fewer child behavior problems, higher levels of sociability, and higher levels of academic performance in children and adolescents. According to preeminent child psychologist Dr. Kyle Pruett of Yale University, boys and girls raised with engaged fathers demonstrate a greater ability to take initiative and to display self-control.

In the area of avoidance of high risk behavior, studies have found that children and adolescents with involved fathers are less likely to commit delinquent acts or to abuse drugs and alcohol. In two studies that were done by the National Fatherhood Initiative, *Family Structure, Father Closeness, and Drug Abuse*, and *Family Structure, Father Closeness, and Delinquency* it was found, very simply, that adolescents who are closer to their fathers are less likely to use drugs and less likely to commit delinquent acts. What was also very significant is that we found that for most of the measures of drug

use and delinquency, **closeness to mother had no impact.** In other words, there is a unique father factor at work that significantly impacts a child's affective development.

This "father factor" tends to produce children who have higher-self esteem, are more cognitively and socially adept, and because they possess these characteristics, they tend to do better in school and they are able to avoid drug abuse and delinquency more successfully.

Let's take a look at another positive way for fathers to be involved ...

<click to Lightsaber PSA>

<click to NFI logo>

So, what is NFI doing in the United States to reverse the trend of fatherlessness and help men become the best dads they can be?

Our mission is to improve the well-being of children by increasing the proportion of children growing up with involved, responsible, and committed fathers. We accomplish this mission through a strategy of educating, equipping, and engaging all sectors of society about the importance of fathers.

You have seen a few examples of the public education campaign we run. NFI produces and disseminates television, radio, print, outdoor, and Internet ads

to educate and inspire the public, especially fathers, about the unique and irreplaceable role they play in children's lives. The ads run across the U.S. in both English and Spanish.

Here are two more of our ads, a television ad and a radio ad.

<click to errand and lullaby>

<click to NFI logo>

We also produce and disseminate research on fatherhood, marriage, and family structure to keep the public informed of the importance of father involvement.

To equip the public, we run the National Fatherhood Clearinghouse and Resource Center at [www.fatherhood.org](http://www.fatherhood.org) , perhaps the largest collection of fatherhood materials in the U.S. NFI offers books, brochures, curricula, CD-ROMS, and other resources to give both individual fathers and the organizations that serve them the tools they need to be the best dads they can be.

We also offer many of our resources in Spanish.

<click to Spanish resource slide>

Last, we engage the culture at all levels in strategic partnerships and alliances to reach men at their points of need and to mobilize the public around this issue. There was a bank robber in the U.S. in the 1940's named Willy Sutton. When he was arrested they asked him why he robbed banks. He said, "Because that is where the money is." Well, NFI likes to go where the fathers are, so we call it our Willy Sutton strategy. Rather than trying to pull men out of their comfort zones, we find people and organizations that are at the connection points in "male culture" and inspire these organizations to add fatherhood programming to the work they are already doing to strengthen families.

<click to logo>

As Latin America works to lift its people out of poverty and strengthen its economies, one strategy that cannot be ignored is the strengthening of the institution of fatherhood. As I have said, father absence and poverty are intimately linked. When men do not take responsibility to care for their children or to marry the mother of their children, single mothers are left to fend for themselves, dramatically reducing their ability to achieve economic empowerment. Even in the United States, single mothers tend to head the poorest families.

Family strengthening leads to stability – stability for men, for women, and most importantly for children. This stability allows parents to do their most important job – passing on the values to their children that will allow them to

achieve education, social, and economic success. This will create a cycle in which strong families will lead to strong children, which will lead to economic empowerment, and more strong families ...

Ultimately, our work is about connecting fathers and their children—heart to heart. In my view, there are few things more important than this if we want to give children the best chance to succeed in America ... and in Latin America. Thank you.