

Missing dads are major problem for Canadian families

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The issue of black children being raised in fatherless homes has recently been borrowed from urban United States and applied to the social problems of Canadian cities. The recent shootings, gang warfare and disparity in educational outcomes have resulted in blunt talk about black children growing up without the presence of an involved father.



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Unfortunately, those engaged in this discussion mistakenly fail to recognize that this issue crosses all colours and is a major Canadian family problem.

Fatherlessness is rarely spoken about in proper circles as if the reality will simply go away if we deny its existence.

The trend is clear and evident in the statistics around divorce and the number of children raised in homes headed by single mothers.

The trend is evident in research that suggests that close to 50 per cent of children of separation, within two to three years, will no longer see their father as an involved, influence in their life.

The trend is evident in the statistics identifying earlier marital breakdown that leaves an increasing number of toddler-age children raised in single parent homes.

WHERE ARE THE FATHERS?

The question that needs to be asked is simple: "Where have all the fathers gone?"

The Record's continuing series on poverty has told the stories of individual families (usually headed by a single, young mother) trying desperately to overcome earlier missteps and failed relationships. They have often been overwhelmed by their circumstances and only a few are strong enough or supported in the right way to make it out of long-term poverty to a new place of hope and opportunity.

For every single mother, there is a single father . . . somewhere. Unfortunately, this obvious assertion is often overlooked, denied or ignored in the way that many teen pregnancies and separations play themselves out in our society.

As a secondary school teacher and parent of three former teens, I came to understand that the choices facing every teen were often different and potentially riskier. The changes in our society have rushed adult choices and adolescents today are no more prepared for them than earlier generations would have been. The absence of a father and the paternal extended family further complicates the outcomes for many children.

Many Western societies are coming to recognize that the issues of violence, school failure, drugs and adolescent sexual behaviour are outcomes rooted in the disappearing dad and that positive outcomes are rooted in the continuous involvement of mom and dad.

Finding fault for the fade-away dad is, in some ways, a fool's game because our concern must be to change our approach and find solutions that respond to the real problem.

Politicians too often believe that throwing money blindly at single moms will provide a solution. The legal system often hides behind the adversarial system instead of supportive two-parent solutions for children. Fathers too often bang into obstacles and allow the bruises obtained to excuse them from the commitment they made on the day they became dad.

The vast majority of separated dads that I have worked with for three years desperately wanted to be or continue to be an involved parent. There have been some moving success stories where a child will now have their dad sharing their journey for a lifetime.

Unfortunately, there are also some of our dads who became a missing parent. Even with support, the obstacles and complications that became part of their lives overcame them.

They were and are decent men and fathers who are victims of a failed approach to the needs of our children.

In many ways the lessons that I have learned are derived from this group. They loved their children when they were born and love them the same to this day. Some did not possess the stubbornness to overcome the multitude of obstacles in their path; others were too fragile emotionally to survive the loss on a daily basis.

These men are dads, too. They didn't forfeit that role. Their children didn't surrender their need to love and be loved by both parents.

Our task is to recognize the problem of fatherlessness to be as real as any social problem in our society. Its human toll dates from the moment a separation occurs and is never ending.

Every time a child is missing an involved dad, there is a failure somewhere. It must be our responsibility to create the conditions and atmosphere that ensure that no child unnecessarily suffers this outcome.

It is doable; anything less is unacceptable.

Barry Lillie of Kitchener is a retired teacher and facilitator of a support group for fathers.