

# The influence of fathers' involvement on sons' health

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Psychologists have known for some time that fathers have a significant influence on their sons' psychosocial and emotional development (Lisak, 1994; Richards & Duchkett, 1996). Recently, researchers have been discovering more about the link between healthy fatherhood and men's psychological health (Ball, Moselle, & Pedersen, 2007). The characteristics of the father, the amount of time he spends with his children, and the closeness of the father/child relationship have all consistently predicted male adjustment outcomes in clinical and non-clinical populations (for reviews, see Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001).

Traute Klein (1999), in his "Lessons I Learned from my Father," vividly described the powerful influence his father had on his life. Klein (1999) writes, "I have no recollection of why we were there or where we were going. I do not even remember starting on the trek or finishing it. It didn't matter. The only thing that mattered was my little hand in my father's big hand... Without my father's hand to guide me and his voice to encourage me, I would not have dared even to think of crossing that long, long bridge, a bridge with nothing but a rail to hang onto. This seemingly endless trek that my father and I took in the autumn of 1945, through the totally devastated city of Berlin, is one of the post-war scenes that remain firmly engraved in my mind... Throughout all those years my father never needed to preach to us. He taught us by his presence and by his example" (paraphrased from Klein, 1999).

Klein's story of fatherhood and closeness is one that many sons do not share. There are sons' today who are haunted by the ruins of alienated relationships with fathers. They are haunted by the transgenerational wounds passed on to them (Biller, 1982; Corneau, 1991). It is difficult to measure the experience of sons' who have lived with an alienated relationship with their fathers. Rather than a calming presence, the fathers' presence creates chaos. Instead of bringing security, these fathers bring injury; fear without reassurance, pain without comfort.

How destructive is this path? Researchers reported in a 1994 study that children exhibiting violent misbehaviour in school were 11 times more likely to live without their fathers as were children who did not exhibit violent behaviour (Ko, 1999). In fact, low supervision of adolescents was found to be a greater cause of delinquency than poverty (Sampson & Laub, 1994). The absence of fathers is consistently associated with juvenile emotional disorders, crime, suicide, promiscuity, and later marital break-up (Rotheisler, 1997). The United States Department of Justice reports that 72% of adolescents who committed murders, 60% of those who committed acts of rape, and 70% of those who became long-term prisoners grew up in father-absent homes (Ko, 1999). Of these developmental risks, sons are more likely than daughters to commit suicide, to be violent, to abuse substances, and to go to prison.

Strained father/son relationships have significant, weighty implications for men's

overall psychological health, but when the relationship between fathers and sons is healthy, the relationship has a profound positive effect on the psychological health of both sons and fathers (Ball et al., 2007). Ball et al. (2007) show that a healthy father/child relationship can militate against violence, delinquency, suicide, and hospital visits. Furthermore, when fathers are close to their children, both are less likely to engage in substance abuse and children are more likely to abstain from substance use. Healthy father/child relationships protect children and predict overall healthier life ecology. Positive father involvement is associated with healthy coping strategies in fathers and children, and it results in lower risk of negative health outcomes for both fathers and children (Ball et al., 2007).

Psychologists researching masculine health issues have found that the changing nature of masculinity in late modernity is creating a health crisis for men (Levant, 1997; Robertson 2007). Their findings support what others have long theorized, gender ideology and masculine identifications are intergenerational transmission processes that are passed from father to son (Dadson,

Westwood, & Oliff, in press; Luddy & Thompson 1997; Mussen & Berkele 1959; Robertson 2007). Discovering more about how fathers' alienation specifically affects their sons will give health care practitioners insight into this particular male injury and will help address the health care issues of men who have experienced a failed relationship with their fathers.

Counselling psychologists are working hard to learn more about how to help men's health care issues and how to help equip fathers to interrupt the cycle of absence, neglect and abuse. That means we need further conceptual elaboration, more research, and the development of better clinical interventions. This will give health care providers improved tools to help men. Together we can discover new and better ways to help men and enable them to become the kind of fathers who will guide sons through life's dangers even "when all other bridges seem to be destroyed" (Klein 1999).

**References available upon request at  
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