

Vital education for our men

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This review is about a longitudinal study of a group US of adolescents and what impact closeness to their father has on their life. It does comment on the impact family separation can have on children, especially the father/child relationship. Please note, there are other studies that highlight that children are less impacted by the experience of family separation but more by the degree of conflict that occurs.

There are many reasons that men are not often seen in health/community welfare centres. Most significantly, appointment times are often during the day when it is difficult for men or women to have time off from work. Also many men question and are wary of involvement with external community welfare agencies. King (2005) recognises that many men have a strong suspicion about people who influence their family life. Besides trusting family members, many men have little trust and question the relevance of new ideas about relationships until a crisis occurs and some change is required.

From boyhood, competitiveness is nurtured as young men are taught not to 'be walked over by other people'. This process continues as the child grows into manhood with entrenched values of independence and autonomy. For many men, a suggestion that they need to change what they are thinking or doing is met by a high degree of resistance. Accompanied with this, most do not fully recognise the significant impact they play in their family relationships. They are more conscious of what others think they should be doing differently, like 'men should show more of their feelings'. This assumption is that something needs to be fixed; the father has to learn to act differently. Due to this, professionals need to work harder at the pre-engagement stage when working with men, to find an alternative way to deal with any suspicion and defensiveness.

This study is well designed and provides a great overview into how different variables and issues are controlled for in research. It finds that:

1. Adolescents who are close to their non-resident fathers report higher self-esteem, less delinquency, and fewer depressive symptoms than adolescents who live with a father with whom they are not close.
2. Adolescents living with a father with whom they are not close have better grades and engage in and less substance use than those having a non-resident father who is not close. At the same time, however, not being close to a resident father is associated with lower self-esteem compared to having a non-resident father who is not close.
3. Adolescents do best of all when they have close ties to resident fathers. A central conclusion of this study is that it is important to consider the quality of father-child relations among those who have a resident father when assessing the impact of non-resident fathers on their children.
4. Closeness to fathers reduces violence similarly in resident-father families and non-resident-father families.

The study does control for the difference in age and how adolescents may respond differently to either the mother or father.

How do offspring who are close to their non-resident fathers compare to those who are not close to their resident fathers? Adolescents with close non-resident fathers have higher self-esteem, report less delinquency, and have fewer depressive symptoms than those with resident fathers with whom they are not close (RN). Thus, for three of the six problem behaviours, offspring benefit from having a close relationship with their non-resident father compared to offspring residing with a distant resident father. There was no difference between the two groups with respect to school grades, being involved in violent activities, or substance use.

Are offspring who are not close to their non-resident fathers better or worse off than those residing with a father who is not close? Living with a father with whom one is not close has several advantages over having a non-resident father who is not close (NN), namely, that the former get better grades, are less violent, and are less likely to be involved in substance use. Also, findings indicate that the disadvantage of living with a father with whom they are not close is that the offspring have lower self-esteem.

Do offspring who are close to their non-resident fathers ever do as well as those who are close to resident fathers? Offspring close to their non-resident fathers do not do as well as those close to resident fathers (RC). For none of the six problem behaviours were those close to non-resident fathers equal to or better than those close to resident fathers.

In summary, “for several forms of problem behaviour, having a close relationship with a non-resident father is superior to having a poor relationship with a resident father. However, having a close relationship with a non-resident father is never equal to or better than having a close relationship with a resident father. Having continuous access to and interaction with a resident father with whom they are close trumps any other resident–closeness combination. However, a distant resident father has both advantages and disadvantages compared to having a non-resident father who is not close” (Booth, Scott. & King, 2009 p.601).

What is the take home message?

Again, these research outcomes are important messages for men to hear. Men’s actions in family life are very powerful and make a difference on the lives of their children. Most men do not realise this. Some men may need to be challenged ‘do you really want to go ahead and stuff up your kid’s lives for the rest of their life?’!

As we know well, the quality of the father’s relationship with his children is paramount. It is important to support men to talk about experiences that build a sense of closeness with their children i.e. birth stories, special times and how they spend time together with their children. For men these are pivotal moments in their life that support periods of reflection, softness and the development of empathy.

I often refer to this as a relationship tide, when the tide goes out, we don’t walk away from the ocean and say “that’s it, I’m never going to see the water again”! No, we wait for the tide to turn (return) and have faith that our relationship will float again.

Below is an excellent exercise that increases men’s awareness of how they deal with the relationship tide, awareness of their child’s developmental needs and how the experience of closeness fluctuates over time. It is excellent to use with a wide range of men and is a conceptual, emotional and practical way to reflect on our closeness with our children.

Our child's development exercise and connection exercise by Andrew King

Context:

This exercise is excellent for connecting parents to their child's significant developmental milestones and how close they felt in that relationship. The exercise identifies two important things about child development:

1. Different ages when significant events occur
2. Emotional closeness to children varies due to significant events.

When to use:

This exercise is valuable for mothers, fathers or other care givers to complete. It is useful when parents have periodic contact with their children (i.e. they are separated or their children are in care).

Conducting the exercise:

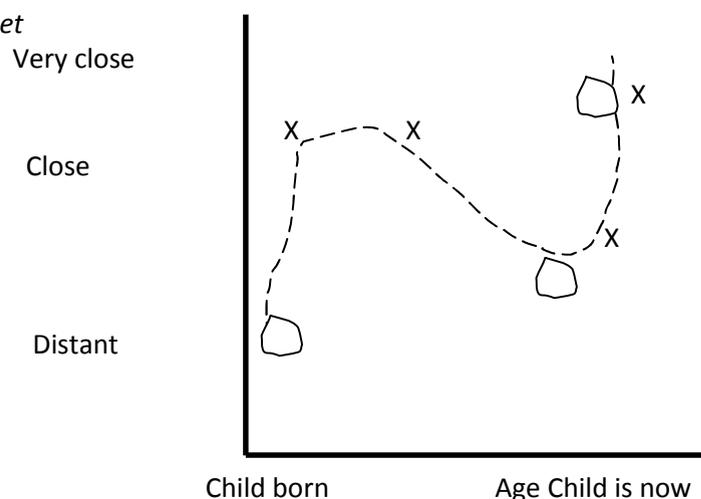
Ask each participant to choose one of their children and write their **child's name** in the top right hand corner. This exercise can be done without participants needing to write words but by using symbols instead. **Explain** that the horizontal line represents the child's age. On the right hand side of the page, the child's **current age** is written on the dotted line. Have everyone mark **the horizontal** age line in five different places representing **5 important events** in that child's life which they remember. **Explain** that the vertical line represents how close or far away the father feels to that child at the five significant ages that they have marked.

Everyone circles on their sheet:

- The age where the child changed the most physically
- The age where the child showed their greatest independence
- The age where that child was the hardest to get on with

Participants are asked to discuss their sheet and what they learnt from this exercise. If in a group, other people may also comment on the patterns they see.

An example of a completed sheet



Extension questions:

1. What did your child need most from you over this time?

2. How did you handle the periods of closeness and distance between you and your child?
3. Who did you learn this life skill from? What did they teach you?
4. How did you respond to your child's developmental changes (need for independence and emotional difficulties)?

The full transcript of the study can be found and a copy of this exercise, visit www.mfrn.net.au /resources library/program development.

References

Booth, A.; Scott, M. & King, V. (2009). Father Residence and Adolescent Problem Behavior - Are Youth always better off in two-parent families. *Journal of Family Issues* , 585-605.

King, A. (2005) 'The "quiet revolution" amongst men: Developing the practice of working with men in family relationships' *Children Australia*, 30 (2): 33-37.

All the best

Andrew King