

## Are All Family Forms Equal?

by Warren Throckmorton, Ph.D.

*Some scholars say it's unprogressive and discriminatory to believe in the importance of fathers.*

As in the culture at large, there is an ongoing discussion in the social sciences about the impact of father-absence on children.

Individuals such as David Blankenhorn, of the Institute for American Values, advance the idea that children are best served by having a married mother and father in the home. On the other hand, some in academia, notably Louise Silverstein and Nancy Polikoff, have argued that parental gender—especially the male gender—may be irrelevant to the rearing of children.

For instance, in a 2003 paper concerning lesbian and straight single mothers, Dr. Polikoff of Santa Clara University wrote, “I start this paper with the premise that it is no tragedy, either on a national scale or in an individual family, for children to be raised without fathers.”

Scholars such as Polikoff often lament discrimination against alternative family forms. For instance, Louise Silverstein and Carl Auerbach, in their *American Psychologist* article “Deconstructing the Essential Father,” wrote, “The social policy emerging out of the neoconservative framework is of grave concern to us because it discriminates against cohabiting couples, single mothers, and gay and lesbian parents.” For them, any interpretation of research that makes fatherhood of essential importance to child rearing is considered unprogressive and discriminatory.

But are all family forms equal? In this review, I cannot extensively examine the evidence concerning father absence, except to recommend Blankenhorn’s book, *Fatherless America*. However, I can review a relevant study not cited by Drs. Silverstein, Auerbach or Polikoff that significantly undermines their thesis. I have not seen this study quoted in any discussion of same-sex parenting, pro or con, but I believe the findings are quite important to the issue.

The research in question was conducted by Dr. Bruce Ellis and colleagues and published in a 1999 edition of the pres-

tigious *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. The study investigated the lives of 173 girls and their families from pre-kindergarten to the girls’ seventh-grade year. The researchers wanted to examine the family’s role in the timing of puberty for girls in the study.

Specifically, the authors sought an answer to the question: “Does a biological father’s investment in family influence the timing of puberty for his daughter?” As improbable as it may seem, biological fathers appear to have an impact upon the timing of a daughter’s entrance into womanhood.

Such a question is important because early maturation in girls is one of the leading factors associated with such negative outcomes as teenage pregnancy, alcohol and drug use, mental health disturbances and even breast cancer.

But you may protest: Isn’t puberty biological? Why study the role of environment, especially parenting, on an event that is rooted in biology?

While pubertal timing does have a clear biological component, the onset of puberty is earlier now than in past decades. Environment and/or culture may be having some kind of impact. The authors wondered from an evolutionary viewpoint whether the investment of fathers in their families was a sociological artifact, or rather, some kind of biological deterrent to the early maturity of daughters.

So what is the influence? The researchers found that low paternal investment is associated with early puberty in girls. In other words, a biological father in the home providing emotional support to his daughter influences later onset of puberty more than any other variable studied.

Let this finding sink in for a moment. The study authors suggest that through some mechanism not understood, experience impacts biological development to retard or accelerate the onset of puberty and the subsequent entrance into adult sexuality. To quote Ellis’ report: “The present data highlight the importance of early paternal

involvement in the development of 'healthy' reproductive functioning in daughters."

Talk about politically incorrect statements! By having a loving biological dad around, girls are at a lower risk for teen pregnancy, alcohol and drug use and depression.

Extending this finding to family policy in general, the implications are provocative. Maybe President Bush's marriage initiative is a pretty good idea after all. Are lesbian and gay parents, and single-moms-by-choice, equivalent to mother-father pairs? Biologically speaking, it may not be so. Public policy cannot guarantee mother and father pairs for all children, but to *create situations* that guarantee that both genders *won't* be available seems like a risky social experiment.

Although confirming research is needed, policy initiatives

supporting the traditional mom-and-dad dyad seem consistent not just with common sense, but with the way we appear to be wired.

So is social policy favoring moms and dads "discriminatory"? Yes—and it may well favor the best interests of children over the convenience of adults.

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