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# Working with Fathers...Fatherhood 2000: Looking Backwards Towards the Future

Glen F. Palm

*St. Cloud State University*, [gfpalm@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:gfpalm@stcloudstate.edu)

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## Fatherhood 2000: Looking Backwards Towards the Future



### Key Words

fathering, cultural & social trends (& fatherhood), roles (of fathers), divorce (& fatherhood), attachment (& fathers), masculinity (& fathers role)

As the first *Working with Fathers* article of the year 2000, I would like to take this opportunity to consider the future of fatherhood by looking back to important lessons from the history of fatherhood. Looking backwards to understand the future is an important principle in future studies. If you want to look 25 years into the future you need to go back at least 50 years to understand evolving trends that are propelling us into the future. Many of our current concerns about the future of fatherhood have been defined through a time-limited analysis of the past. This article will focus on a long term view of recent trends and then taking a giant step backwards to describe some long term trends that are influencing fatherhood in American society. Finally, long and short term views will be combined to outline some lessons to inform our current attempts to assist fathers through parent and family education and move us towards positive images of fatherhood.

### Recent Trends and the Changing Faces of Fatherhood: 1970-2000

As a culture we tend to focus more on short term trends as a way to predict and understand the future. When we think about the changing role of fathers a variety of short term trends come to mind. The recent concern about fatherlessness comes from an analysis of current divorce trends and the increasing number of children born out of wedlock. These trends are used to document a dramatic change in the family life with close to 40% of children no longer living with their biological fathers (Blankenhorn, 1995). Mintz (1998) identifies a set of recent trends that have

had a significant impact on fatherhood over the last 30 years. The first is the influx of mothers into the work force, which has diminished the male role as sole breadwinner (and the power that goes with this role). A second factor is the sexual revolution and the discounting of the traditional marriage contract. The growth in the divorce rate and non-marital cohabitation patterns has made families less stable. Finally, the legalization of abortion has led some men to shed moral responsibility for a child's birth. The contradictory trends towards more involved and nurturant fatherhood, at the same time that record numbers of men appear to be detaching from their biological children, are also important to note.

Most of the trends that we hear about are short term and use the idealized image of the nuclear family as the basis for interpreting the trends. The interpretation of these trends depends upon one's ideological views about family and gender. The short term trends of an increase in the number of female headed households, the increase of working mothers, and the increase in out of wedlock births all have significant impacts on the role and experience of fatherhood by men. While some men celebrate the opportunities for greater involvement in the new fatherhood, others are left feeling powerless to be involved in their child's life and other men embrace the new sexual freedom and avoid responsibility for children. The short term trends create a picture



of contradictions and confusion about the role and necessity of fatherhood. These trends leave us with two very different feelings. One of *liberation from patriarchal family forms* and the *celebration of the increasing diversity in family forms* and the other *fearful about the stability of marriage and family life* and *anxiety about the necessity of fathers*.

## A Long term View of Family Trends: Fatherhood from 1800 to 2000

Frank (1998) examines fatherhood in the 19th century and reveals a number of important observations that can be helpful in providing a different perspective. The previous examinations of the history of fatherhood outlined the changing roles for fathers from *moral teachers* during colonial times to *breadwinners* during the 19th century to *sex role models* in the 1940-50s to the new *nurturant males* of the 1970s (Pleck, 1987, Rotundo, 1985). These categories capture some changes in emphasis on father's roles but are limited in understanding the diversity of experiences of fatherhood by men in different social classes, cultures and family forms (Pleck & Pleck, 1997). The recent emphasis on increasing family diversity may be short sighted. We have always had diverse family forms based on shorter life-spans and the resulting changes in family structure as well as diverse economic realities.

Cultural diversity and family patterns also have a long history but have attracted even less attention and study than the history of white, middle-class families. Both mothers and fathers have always worked to provide for the family. It was only for a brief period during the 1950-60s that the idealized image of the stay-at-home mother was a dominant image. The 1950s and 1960s are an aberration in family life. A time when government provided support to families through the tax structure, home loans and education loans to reintegrate World War II veterans back into work and family life. Mintz (1998) describes two long term trends that are important for a broader view of fatherhood. The first is the *increased emphasis on the importance of the mother-child dyad as the primary and enduring family unit*. This long term trend has continued even as mothers have moved into the provider and co-breadwinner roles. The second is

*the erosion of the family wage which has been replaced by the individual wage*. This trend reflects a changing economy and the de-emphasis on the family as the primary economic unit.

There are also a number of other long-term realities that should be considered in understanding fatherhood today. First, *fathers have always cared about their children and have often struggled with the verbal expression of this care*. The issue of work and family balance for fathers has also been an ongoing challenge. The economic context has influenced men and families in very direct ways that have shaped the practice of fatherhood. The emphasis on the breadwinner role gave men a clear definition of priorities and the influence on their child's well-being was based on the idea that increased income was a key for opening doors of opportunity for their children. Men were always encouraged to spend time with their children, but investment in work was seen as a valid reason for limited time with children. Fathers even in the 19th century were expected to be engaged with their children when they were home. Frank (1998) describes the expectations for father involvement.

*"Meal times were also favored occasions for fathers to take charge of their families. William Alcott recommended that fathers use the morning meal to announce the plan of the day and evening meal to lead a family review of the past day's actions. The ideal father converted the dinner table into a seminar table whose educational benefits, in Alcott's estimation, could surpass 'the whole course of instruction at our common schools.' Mealtime and fireside rituals that took advantage of father's morning and evening presence reinforced his symbolic importance and influence even as his work drew him increasingly away from home."* (p.32).



Fathers in the 19th century were also advised to be playmates with their children (Frank, 1998).

*“He (Bushnell) urged fathers to provide toys, arrange play times, and invite suitable companions for their children: Sometimes, too, the parent having a hearty interest in the play of his children, will drop out for the time the sense of his years, and go into the frolic of their mood with them.”* (p. 34).

The contemporary involved father has also been described as a playmate and urged to take responsibility for setting aside quality time to be with his children. Fathers throughout the last 200 years in American history have been advised to use play as an important way to connect with their children.

The current confusion about fatherhood and masculinity is shifting away from the 19th century ideas about manhood and family. Frank (1998) describes the connection between fatherhood and masculinity by 19th century writers, *“Over the course of the nineteenth century, religious and secular moralists went to great lengths to convince men that fatherhood was the assumption of a man’s highest responsibility and that family duty was a cornerstone of masculine identity.”* (p. 35).

Another theme that began to emerge in the 19th century was the idea that men will benefit from fatherhood as a way to perfect their own character. Frank (1998) notes that, *“For men, the moral imperative of parenthood stemmed from two principal psychic rewards: Fatherhood softened an otherwise callous masculine nature. Paternal responsibility also inspired fortitude. By orienting men toward the future, having children made more bearable, present-day setbacks and travails.”* (p. 35).

Griswold (1998) also points out the therapeutic tone of some contemporary fatherhood advocates, who see involved fatherhood as a way to change individual men.

## Combining Long and Short Term Perspectives on Fatherhood

The long term trends and consistent themes provide a useful foundation for understanding contemporary fathers. The persistent themes

that emerge from examining 200 years of fatherhood in America are:

1. Diverse family structures, different social classes and cultural values have always existed and will continue to impact men’s experience of fathering.
2. Fathers do care deeply about their children but often struggle with the communication and expression of emotional intimacy.
3. Men continue to struggle with finding a balance of investment in work and family life. Economic realities have often pushed men further from their family and each wave of change brings challenges to find new ways to balance work and family life.
4. Men have been encouraged to seek moral improvement and individual self growth through investment in fatherhood and family life.
5. Play has been an important means for fathers to connect with their children.



- ▀ The long term trends that continue to influence fatherhood today are the continued emphasis on the mother-child dyad as the essential nucleus of family life. This has tended to push fathers to the periphery of family life.
- ▀ The second important trend is the decline of the family wage in favor of the individual wage making it difficult for families to survive with one wage earner. This trend will continue to influence fatherhood and family life and put children at risk.

These long term trends and themes help us see the last 30-50 years in a different light.

**Economic and social change has created a period of disequilibrium as men and**

**women look for new ways to share family power and responsibility.** Because of *multiple contexts*, there is not one model of family life that is likely to emerge as the new ideal. Some have suggested a return to the nuclear family with a central role for the nurturant and responsible father. Others suggest that diverse family structures are the most healthy adaptation, and the idealized nuclear family of the 1950s serves as an anti-model for family life. *The real challenge is to restore a sense of equilibrium that allows men and women a variety of options for sharing the responsibility of raising children.*

## Conclusion and Implications for Practice

It is difficult to predict future economic and social changes. Stable family life has often played the role of buffering individuals from the social and economic changes. One positive image that appears to encompass many current family situations is *co-parenting*. The basis of this image is *shared responsibility and equality between mothers and fathers*. This can occur within and across different family structures. It also provides a space for fathers and stability for children.

- ♦ Parent and family educators can take the lessons from history to assist fathers in understanding the long and short term influences on contemporary fatherhood. Both mothers and fathers need support in finding a balance of work and family life in our changing economy.
- ♦ We also need to be advocates for family friendly policies that support a healthy work and family balance.
- ♦ The ideals of co-parenting can be explored with both mothers and fathers as we continue to address gender tensions and paths to gender reconciliation that incorporate individual differences.
- ♦ Diverse family structures are a reality and will continue to be the place where men and women — mothers and fathers — seek to



find a balance of power and responsibility for raising children.

Parent and family educators can play an important role by supporting mothers and fathers in developing the understanding and skills for establishing co-parenting models and family equilibrium.



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*Dr. Glen Palm is Professor of Child and Family Studies, St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, MN. He is a parent educator and consultant on fathering and parent education. He is co-author of Working with Fathers.*