

When father doesn't father . . .



. . . sons can go astray

by Richard M. Smith*

While mothers took it on the chin for years, charged as the principal felons in the production of juvenile delinquents, the role of the father is now becoming more widely appreciated, particularly in the case of delinquent boys.

More specifically, it is the absence of a role played by the father that is increasingly recognized as a key factor in delinquency among male youth.

A father who is absent from the home either physically because of disease, death, divorce, or military service, or who refuses to assume the parental

role within the home, even when he's physically present, leaves an emotional vacuum that does particular damage to boys, especially during the critical developmental stage of years 2-8.

While the absence of a father — or a father who functions as such — may also damage children from age 8 through adulthood, the effects are not nearly as significant as when absence occurs in the earlier years.

Parents, in general, serve as models for their children. Parental behavior illustrates for the child what actions are acceptable by society at large. Indeed, initially, parents are society.

Simply put, mothers serve as models for their

*Assistant professor in home economics, Dr. Smith specializes in child development and family relations

daughters, demonstrating the role a daughter may expect to play as a woman and mother. Sons look to their fathers and see a provider, a disciplinarian, a father, and a husband — all roles that the son may one day come to assume.

Certain emotions can only develop properly in a young male when he has a father to show him the way. How does a male display affection? How does he handle frustration? How can anger be expressed without its damaging or offending others or seeming ludicrous to them?

Watching a functioning father can provide clues. Without a father to watch in acts of affection, anger, discipline, etc., a boy doesn't know, himself, how appropriately to express affection even toward family members including his own mother.

And he has even less idea, without a model, how to express anger. This can lead to problems in getting along in school with teachers and playmates. Such boys have problems making friends, they don't make decisions well, and this can lead to anti-social acts.

A significantly greater percentage of non-delinquent boys come from homes where the father is there and actively directing things. Children in such situations seem more secure, friendly, calm, and accepting of authority. They make friends more easily, too.

Generally, the earlier in the 2-8 age range that the father is gone, the more damage done, for it is at this time that the son begins to appropriate for himself, and take comfort in, the actions of his father. Lasting negative effects of long paternal absence during this period appear not easily modified in later life.

Equally damaging to the emotional development of a boy is the failure or refusal of his father to assume the masculine role of provider and disciplinarian in the home. For, such refusal or failure is likely to be viewed with some hostility by the mother as well. Here the man of the house really isn't that at all, appearing to have no concern for others while living off them.

This situation might be characterized as the worst "absence" of them all. In such homes there is a high incidence of delinquency among male children. They are much more likely to suffer from imaginary illnesses, to think badly of themselves, and to turn to drugs. It's not difficult to see why.

Where dad doesn't father, where dad doesn't work or dispense discipline, the mother has to take over as household head, make the decisions, earn the living, and keep the kids in line. That's tough enough where the woman is alone, but when she sees her mate shirking responsibilities and she's got to earn his bread *too*, she's apt to become bitter against her man and against men in general.

Male children, watching their father model villified in countless tirades by their angry mother, begin to look upon themselves as possessing many of the worthless attributes of their father. In fact they begin to regard the entire business of being male as a bad business.

How serious this kind of self-loathing can be is illustrated by one male delinquent who described his situation at home this way: "My old lady ran the home and she had no use for men because they were lazy, no good, drunken 'SOB's.'" He added that his dad hadn't helped at all in raising any of the children, nor helped solve any of the family's problems. The boy felt worthless, and that living was pointless. Convicted of burglary, theft, and assault, he had also attempted suicide 18 times.

Either of the two father absent situations above can lead to a mother-child relationship that can devastate the process of growing up. It's commonly called overprotection. With the father gone or refusing to have anything to do with the family, the mother will frequently move in to shelter the children. Protection is a natural motherly function, but without the leaven of the father's "Ahh, fer pete's sake, willya let the kid . . .," the mother is apt to spread her wings too wide and the child, emotionally, never gets quit of the nest.

All problems are brought to mom for solving, from simple decisions on what clothes should be worn to getting back a prized toy from another child. To the extent that the mother cooperates — and where father is absent, she's more apt to — the child will be increasingly bound to her. In the end practically every decision of social consequence will have to be decided by the mother — makeup, friends of both sexes, parties, school courses, and the like.

That, in itself, would be bad enough. But for the young male, the tendency in the absence of dad, is to model his behavior on his mother's. She may be the best mother in the world, but she's a woman, and women in our society express their feelings differently — frequently more publicly — than do men, they modulate their expressions of anger more, they even wave their hands differently. In such situations young males frequently come to exhibit feminine characteristics.

Watching his father, a boy may see that one appropriate reaction to a bully is to hit him, or to take out his anger in sports. From his mother he may only learn to shriek his anger or stamp his foot. Or he may learn nothing at all, and thus express anger in ways that are entirely inappropriate, whether it comes to hitting girls or stealing from stronger boys who frustrate him. The point of it is that his actions, seemingly rational to him, are frowned on by his playmates and

adults alike, earning him their scorn, and further infuriating him. This may lead him to still further acts of rage — again unacceptable ones — and so a cycle begins. It is the cycle of the aggressive child. This cycle may lead eventually to criminally delinquent acts and bring the child before the courts. It is a cycle, however, that can be broken.

It has been found that non-aggressive boys more frequently come from homes where the father is present and may provide identification and appropriate modelling for behavior. The son learns various methods of venting anger in ways that society approves. He can learn from his father to rationalize his defeat or frustration, to take out his anger on acceptable substitute objects from punching bags to bowling pins, to killing off armies of tin soldiers. The key to breaking the cycle of aggression in male children seems to be a reuniting with the father in a positive relationship. If the father returns from a long physical absence, or if he can be persuaded to take an active interest in a son he has ignored, the anti-social acts tend to die off.

Finally, there is one more method by which a father may absent himself from his son. In this case it is not passive retirement from functioning as a head of household that does the damage; it is picking out the son and rejecting him, physically or verbally. Here the man may be around the house, he may earn the living, love his wife, even take part with other children, but with this child he is hostile. The reasons for this are legion, such as his feeling threatened by his son, but such behavior on the part of the father is one of the best possible predictors we have of delinquency.

Sure, this kind of rejection may not *always* lead to delinquency, but sociologists, psychologists, and other specialists in family life could do well making book on it. In such cases, the child's self-esteem drops to zero or 10 below. He may have an adequate model

to base his behavior on, but this model has personally rejected him. How does he survive?

To compensate, to recover some measure of self-worth, the boy can turn to achievement or to friends outside the home for encouragement. Good grades, home runs, perfect recitation of lines, may bring enthusiastic approval from teachers and coaches, and admiration from friends, provided the child has some talents he can quickly fall back on to buoy himself. Where this occurs, the boy may again reach a realistic level of self-worth, and fit into society. Where it

doesn't, the rejected son (or daughter) may turn to delinquent acts that will gain attention. Disrupting class may gain the boy great attention, if not goodwill, and when he's been rejected at home, that may be enough to encourage him to continue. It does give him an unrealistic sense of self-worth; it's not unlike the adult who mistakes notoriety for accomplishment.

Bullying may also prove attractive to the rejected boy, allowing him a sense of superiority. He may later seek it with use of a gun by which he can control the actions of scores of people. Here again he mistakes notice for esteem.

This sense of rejection among delinquents is vividly illustrated in a recent study. Children were asked if their fathers and mothers were able to show open affection toward them. They were also asked if they were able to show open (public)

affection toward their parents. A far greater percentage of delinquent children replied that both they and their parents would be embarrassed by any public display of affection for one another. Non-delinquent children reported that they and their parents were at ease with public affection.

In closing, we must admit that we don't know all that is involved in a son's learning or failing to learn to identify with his father. But it is clear that a close, affectionate relationship between father and son serves to insulate the son against delinquency.

