

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why Fathers Matter

Report to Family First New Zealand, Father's Day 2018



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When we celebrate Father's Day, we are celebrating much more than the love and appreciation we have for our dads. We are celebrating one of our most important natural resources. As we will see in this report, and in so many interesting ways, no society can thrive without as many fathers as possible being involved daily in the lives of their children.

A diverse and abundant body of research conducted over the past 50 years proves this – in sometimes unexpected ways. This report is a presentation and explanation of the best findings of this research by the world's leading scholars on the topic. There are so many facts here that most of us would never consider or come to appreciate without this research. It is important that dads themselves, as well as mums, grandparents, teachers, policy makers, clergy, pediatricians, government bodies, and law enforcement know why and how fathers matter, not just in the lives of their families, but in society itself.

The most significant differences explained in this report are:

Dads matter because they're different: Infants can determine the difference between mum and dad caring and playing with them from the first weeks of life, simply because mum and dad do these tasks differently. This is the child's first and perhaps most important lesson about being human: that there are two types of human beings in the world, male and female, each with wonderful and very distinct qualities. Our children can and do seek out one or the other when they have specific needs because of the different ways, beyond the purely practical, that males and females meet those needs.

Dads and the development of empathy: We would generally think that mum, with her greater tenderness, would be the one from whom our children gain a sense of empathy for others around them. However, long-term studies show this is not true. Curiously, it is dads who are dramatically more powerful and influential in helping their children develop a sense of care and concern toward others. This finding astonished even the researchers who conducted the studies.

Fathers are more oriented toward the world: Mothers are more likely to *face* their children, so to speak, in their relation to them. Fathers are different. They take their child *beside* them and point them toward the world. This makes a tremendous difference in terms of how mum and dad prepare their children for life. One is more likely to *protect* the child *from* the challenges and dangers of the world. This is good. One is more likely to *prepare* the child *for* such challenges. This is good as well. This distinction can be a source of contention and disagreement between two parents, but this is actually good because of what each provides. A balance between mum's and dad's ways is vital for healthy child development.

Fathers play rough (and that's very good): Most of us have no trouble noticing that fathers play with their children in ways that are quite different from mum. But we don't realise how this difference is so critical for healthy child development. Fathers tend to be more exciting in their play, more stimulating, more physical and rough. This builds confidence in their children. They also tend to be more creative, making up games and using objects other than toys to have fun. Fathers are more likely to encourage the development of large motor skills in their children and teach the important lessons of physical self-control and emotional self-regulation, which are of course, essential social skills.

Dads enrich communication: Few truly recognise and appreciate how mum and dad speak differently to their children, and the difference this in turn makes

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in the children's verbal and communicative development. Mothers are more likely to speak right down to the level of the child, using words and phrases that are easily understood. Dad not so much. His way tends to give the opportunity for more vocabulary lessons because he is more likely to use more complex words. His sentence structure is also more difficult for the child, thus stretching the child in his or her processing. Dad is also more likely to ask open-ended questions of his children, which encourages the crafting of more complex answers. This not only enriches their communication, but their reading literacy as well.

Discipline: Dads discipline children more objectively, more black-and-white, rather than based on the situation or the feelings of the child. Mums are more sensitive to the latter. The balance of these two approaches is critically important, because children will face both situations in the world throughout their lives. Some misbehaviour can be forgiven because of extenuating circumstances. As an illustration, take the example of a father speeding to get his wife to the hospital as she is about to give birth. It would be unnecessarily harsh to make a couple in this situation wait while the officer writes up a ticket. But other situations definitely call for a ticket to be written, such as speeding to get to a sports game. It would be a dereliction of duty not to issue a ticket for this infringement. Dads teach the difference here.

Dads teach respect for the opposite sex: Good fathers, as distinct male parents, teach their girls what they should expect, and not tolerate, from boys as they grow older. They protect their girls from poor choices in long-term relationships. They also teach their sons, by example, how to treat and how *not* to treat women.

Children uniquely impact their fathers: Finally, it has been shown in the last decade or so that becoming a father creates interesting and consequential changes to the physicality of the dad, even before the child is born. New dads tend to gain more weight, right along with mum, during pregnancy. Fathers' brains actually change in some ways while their children are very young, and their hormones change and adjust as well, in consequential ways. This means that not only do dads have important hidden and consequential effects on their children, but his children, even before birth, have an impact on him, changing his hidden physicality to get him ready for the important and unique task of parenting.

No society can have too many dads, but every society can certainly have too few – and suffer irreversible harm because of it. A fatherless family is one that walks with a substantial limp up a difficult incline. Single mums know this all too well. The three Ps of society know this better than anyone: *Police, Principals,* and *Pediatricians*. Why? Because a father reduces crime rates, helps his kids do and behave better at school, and protects them from physical and emotional problems like no one else. It is immoral to disregard him in the family. When we do, society suffers.

We would do well to make sure we live in a community which honours fathers, encourages them in their parenting tasks, and does all it can to make sure that every boy and girl, as much as possible, grows up with the irreplaceable benefit of being loved and cared for every day by his or her own father. Any public policy or community attitude that moves us away from this must be judged immoral as well as contrary to the best and most reliable science on human development.

Fathers matter in more ways than we can imagine, and for unexpected but important reasons.

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Good fathers teach their girls what they should expect, and not tolerate, from boys as they grow older.

Becoming a father creates interesting and consequential changes to the physicality of the dad.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Glenn T. Stanton is the Director of Global Family Formation Studies at Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs. Glenn holds a graduate degree in Interdisciplinary Humanities from the University of West Florida with an emphasis in philosophy and history. He has been working professionally as a respected researcher in the field of sexuality and gender for nearly 25 years.



He is the author of seven books on various aspects of marriage and family, including *The Family Project: The Book* (Tyndale, 2014), *Secure Daughters, Confident Sons: How Parents Guide Their Children into Authentic Masculinity and Femininity* (Multnomah, 2011), *Loving My (LGBT) Neighbor: Being Friends in Grace and Truth* (Moody, 2014), and *The Ring Makes All the Difference: The Hidden Consequences of Cohabitation and the Strong Benefits of Marriage* (Moody, 2011). He has contributed to many others. He was also the author of Family First New Zealand's 2015 report on gender identity *Boys Girls Other – Making Sense of the Confusing New World of Gender Identity*. Glenn is a senior contributor at *The Federalist* – a widely-read social-issues blog – and has been widely quoted on marriage and family issues in major newspapers and magazines such as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *Rolling Stone*, *Newsweek*, *Salon.com*, *The Advocate*, *Washington Blade*, and *Los Angeles Times*. Glenn has also made numerous appearances on cable and network television shows such as MSNBC, Nightline, ABC News, FOX NEWS, CNN, the *Today Show*, and as a return guest on the *Dr. Phil Show*.

He and his wife have five children.



The first Report in this series *Why Mothers Matter* – released on Mother's Day 2018 – is available for free from our website www.familyfirst.nz under 'Research'.

ABOUT FAMILY FIRST NZ

Family First NZ is a charitable organisation formed in 2006, and registered as a charity with the Charities Commission. Its purposes and aims are:

- to promote and advance research and policy regarding family and marriage
- to participate in social analysis and debate surrounding issues relating to and affecting the family
- to educate the public in their understanding of the institutional, legal and moral framework that makes a just and democratic society possible
- to produce and publish relevant and stimulating material in newspapers, magazines, and other media relating to issues affecting families
- to speak up about issues relating to families that are in the public domain

For more information and copies of this report, go to www.familyfirst.nz

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