

Absent Fathers: Effects on Abandoned Sons

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Absent fathers are pervasive in American culture. Father absence is pathological and severely affects the abandoned son's capacity for self-esteem and intimacy. The reason for and type of father absence is important in determining the effects on the adult son. This article discusses the impact of a father's absence on his abandoned son's struggle with self-esteem and intimacy and proposes a treatment model for abandoned sons.

Many adult sons abandoned by their fathers have difficulty developing and sustaining self-esteem, forming lasting emotional attachments, recognizing their feelings, or being expressive with their adult partners and children. These men must turn their attention toward their absent fathers and resolve the mystery of their absence to ensure that their current intimate relationships can succeed. The reasons for the fathers' absence are paramount, as these dictate the effects on the sons.

This article, based on published research and the author's clinical and supervisory experiences, explores the experiences of men abandoned by their fathers, delineates the impact on the sons' feelings of worth and their intimate relationships, and highlights treatment issues central to this situation.

The prevalence of absent fathers across class and ethnic categories suggests that this social problem afflicts many families with profound emotional, developmental, educational, and legal consequences for the aban-

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doned sons (Arendell, 1993; Blankenhorn, 1995; Harado, 1993; Kruk, 1992, 1994; Lamb, 1997; Phares, 1992; Sills, 1995).

FATHER ABSENCE

SOCIAL CONTEXT

In the mid-nineteenth century fathers increasingly moved out of the home for economic reasons. Men came to spend less and less time in a parental role as they came to be seen primarily as economic providers for the family (Griswold, 1993). A major consequence of this shift, as described by Pleck (1987), was a change in role from being an active and present dominant influence in the family to being a physically absent and intermittent dominant influence. Fathers lost the regular opportunity to parent, and children lost their fathers.

Luepnitz (1988) contends that the predominant American family structure is patriarchal and, paradoxically, father-absent. This pervasive construct represents the economic and gender inequities present in American society. Fathers, by virtue of being male, earn more money than mothers, which in turn gives them power (one patriarchal feature) over the rest of the family (Auerbach, 1996).

Fathers can be absent in a variety of ways, both physical and emotional. Many of the reasons fathers are absent from the lives of their sons are direct consequences of society's impact on the family. For example, Mott (1994) cites both historical and contemporary economic conditions that force men to work outside of the home for long hours in habitually dehumanizing environments.¹ The result is alienation in both directions—the father from the family and the family from the father.

The prevalence of divorce and single-parent families also contributes to this discouraging situation. With father absence a major fact of family structure, it's no surprise that we find a vast majority of single-parent families headed by mothers and the minority by fathers. The U.S. Department of Commerce (1994) reported an increase in mother-headed families from 4.4 million in 1960 to 11.9 million in 1993. The percentage of children living apart from their fathers more than doubled between 1960 and 1990, from 17.5% to 36.3% (Blankenhorn, 1995).

Social and economic institutions do not support fathers who, upon divorce or separation, seek to actively parent (Keshet, 1980). Fathers who have joint custody of their children after divorce work fewer hours, earn less money, and typically feel powerless. These disincentives block many fathers from continued involvement with their children after divorce, even those who were involved with their children while married. Of course, divorce does not automatically lead to emotional abandonment of the son and, ironi-

cally, some fathers spend more time with their children after divorce than when they lived full-time with them.

Keshet also reports that some attorneys counsel fathers away from seeking joint custody and that to win custody fathers have to prove the mother unfit. Other fathers are physically absent through divorce, yet dominate the family by breaking agreements regarding visitation or financial support. Fifty percent of divorced fathers have infrequent contact with their children, according to Bryant (1997). In cases of previous violence or threats, the family may still fear him, even though he no longer has contact with them. He could be physically absent yet remain central to the family through myths (Daddy still loves you), secrets (Daddy has another family), or shame (Daddy was abusive to Mommy).

FAMILY DYNAMICS

Absent fathers are those who, in the process of leaving the family, do not offer explanations to their children about the reasons for their departure. The other dominant attribute of this type of father is that he does not stay in contact with his children or, again, offers reasons for his continuing disconnection from them. The children thus abandoned feel their fathers are mysteriously, enigmatically, cryptically, or secretively absent.

Contrast this to the father in military service, who tells his children that he is leaving to perform his duty, maintains ongoing contact through letters and telephone calls, and informs them of his return date in advance, or the divorced father who remains in regular contact with his children and has an ongoing amicable relationship with their mother. These are both physically absent fathers but not emotionally or psychologically absent.

When a father abdicates responsibility in this way, the mother has to address the quandary he creates by his absence, and she frequently does this by attempting to portray the father as still loving his son. This process of the mother explaining the father to the child is problematic for both the son and his mother. A common anguished refrain by the son to his father is "Why did you leave me, too?" The mother, then, bears an unfair burden as she becomes the recurrent, if misplaced, target of her son's understandable rage at his father. The dominant culture reinforces the message of the silent man (Ackerman, 1993).

The absent father, by his lack of communication, conveys a powerful, constricting message to his son to hide his feelings and motives from others. "The inability of the communicator to send clear messages lays the groundwork for the cycle of ambiguity to begin" (Colgan, 1988, p. 76). This, in turn, frequently inhibits or damages the son-mother relationship.

EFFECTS OF FATHER ABSENCE

Fathers abandon their sons for a variety of reasons: through divorce, death, absences due to employment or military service, addictions, incarceration, and chronic physical or mental illness. Society defines some as honorable, such as a father who is missing in action while in military service. Other reasons are felt as disgracing and stigmatizing, such as a father incarcerated for embezzlement, or a mentally disturbed one who commits suicide. An absent father may have a need for adventure or feel unable to meet the requirements of his role (Herzog & Sudia, 1971). The father may experience the son as a rival for the wife's affection and leave for this reason (Jacobsohn, 1976). Any one or any combination of these occurrences can have a powerful impact on the son.

Luepnitz (1988) contends that normal fathering in contemporary America includes some degree of abandonment, and that fathers are normally absent from family life and from emotional relationships with their sons. Yet not all sons suffer from this "normal" abandonment. Some men, with or without treatment, are successful in sustaining intimate relations with wives and children. The complicating factor that defines the sons presented in this article is the mystery of their fathers' absence, rather than the "normative" absence. The fathers' absence impairs the sons' ability to develop and sustain positive self-worth and to form lasting relationships with adult romantic partners. Men originating from this type of background often experience difficulties initiating (Bartholomew, 1990) and sustaining (Byng-Hall, 1991) intimate relationships. How can a boy, matured into adulthood, easily form intimate bonds with an adult spouse when he lacks any model from his absent father for emotional intimacy?

Paradoxically, abandoned sons often have intense feelings related to their absent fathers, typically in one of two variations. The first is emotional reactivity, characterized by the statement "I'll never be like him!" The emotion the son experiences is directly caused by his father's absence. The son's reaction leads him to reject the importance of his father. In so doing, he fetters himself to a position of denial and unresolved grief. Until the son acknowledges his unfulfilled needs and longing for his father, he can remain in turmoil about himself and his intimate relationships.

The second possible form of emotional intensity is over-identification with the father. In this form, the abandoned son idealizes and worships the absent father. The son may base his worship on the actual father he experienced, or the fantasy father that he wishes or wished for, in spite of the father's apparent lack of contact, interest, commitment, or feelings for his son.

The son creates a fantasy image out of discontinuous pieces of information about him (Corneau, 1991).

SELF-ESTEEM AND SHAME

Abandoned sons can have sustained damage to their sense of worthiness throughout their lives. The son may acquire "a sense of self as the kind of person who is abandoned and the son of a father who would abandon" (Herzog & Sudia, p.30). The son acquires a profound distrust of the continuity and stability of relationships. The secrets about why the father left cause the son to question his value to others.

Abandonment can lead to experiences and feelings of shame and stigma. A shame-based identity prohibits men from accessing their needs or emotions and from communicating clearly to others (Schenk & Everingham, 1995). Shame, a feeling of worthlessness coupled with a core sense of inadequacy, can permeate all aspects of a person's life. Shame is a universally experienced affect that becomes problematic when internalized as the foundation of identity (Kaufman, 1985; Lansky, 1992). Men get "shame bound" due to some type of family intimacy dysfunction, such as secrecy perpetuated by or about their absent father.

Male gender socialization is fundamentally shaming around emotional expressiveness (Krugman, 1995). Boys learn to hide sadness and fear and to be overly expressive of anger through violence. Shame constrains a man's emotional expressiveness as he learns to perceive a part of himself as inferior and to believe it should remain hidden. Resocializing men to be aware and expressive of a fuller range of emotions can lead to greater emotional relatedness, both internally and with others.

INTIMACY STRUGGLES

For many abandoned sons the realization of intimacy is a mystery that eludes them. Abandoned men habitually have relationship difficulties with their parents, siblings, chosen partners, and their children. These men frequently enter treatment in response to obvious crises at family developmental transition points.

Engagement, planning for the wedding, and the pregnancy or birth of the first child (or subsequent children) are specific heterosexual milestones that activate anxiety in abandoned sons. At each developmental junction, there are increased intimacy demands. The man may be more likely to flee the relationship at the arousal of intense feelings. His partner may be increasingly anxious and angry at his lack of participation.

The first hurdle is the formation of an intimate premarital relationship (Lynch, 1990). The steady progression through successive stages, from initial attraction to dating to engagement, can be fraught with false starts, detours, and severe fighting. The basic question of boundary definition looms with great importance for both: "Are we a couple?" During this and subsequent phases, distance regulation frequently oscillates between intense

closeness and intense distance.

Both members of the couple may be aware of the intimacy struggles. Once committed or married, abandoned sons can unwittingly replicate the roles enacted by their fathers by being emotionally or physically absent through excessive work, extramarital affairs, or by devaluing their partners. They may actually remain in the relationship physically but be emotionally absent.

Childbirth, especially that of the first son, is an especially intense transition for abandoned men. The new father, missing the model of a nurturing father himself, may become overwhelmed by the tasks of parenting. In addition, the man's own needs immediately become second to the infant's, a difficulty that the maturest of fathers have trouble managing at times. This is a time of great danger for these men and their families. The absence of nurturance from their fathers leaves some new fathers with a revulsion to nurture their own children. Unrealistic expectations of the child's capacities are often evident. It is sometimes painful for the new father to allow his son or daughter the freedom to explore the world, arousing as it does his own pain that emanates from the cryptic loss of his father.

For some men this becomes a time of (re)unification with their father. Caring for an infant son evokes the losses the abandoned men sustained. The dual tasks of mourning the father and bonding with the infant can arise. A desire not to repeat the pattern emerges as a motivation to overcome the loyalty binds and shame. Giving to his child what he didn't receive from his abandoning father sows unequal portions of pleasure and pain.

TREATMENT

Treatment for these abandoned sons seeks to reduce the mystery in order to enhance men's self-esteem and capacity for intimacy. Two types of treatment are possible. The first is with fathers who are available and willing to re-engage with their sons. The second is with sons whose fathers remain absent or wounding in extreme ways. Both treatment types have the potential for healing the wounds of the past and present.

Treatment of abandoned men originates largely from requests by the female partner for couples therapy, customarily when their relationship is in crisis. In heterosexual couples, female partners often complain about the men's emotional, psychological, and physical distance. The men express frustration but acknowledge that something deeper is missing in the relationship. These men willingly participate in treatment, with a stated desire for the relationship to improve and succeed.

I propose a three-tiered approach to treatment that begins by addressing the immediate crisis with marital therapy techniques (Dym, 1995). The first step is the cessation of the crisis. Next comes an in-depth focus on the aban-

done son/absent father dyad. This phase consists of individual treatment of the adult son and includes deliberate grief work (Lazrove, 1996; Lee, 1995; Sprang & McNeil, 1995; Staudacher, 1991) and reunification with the absent father by following principals of intergenerational family therapy (Framo, 1976; Goldberg, 1995; Headley, 1977; McGoldrich, 1997; Schnitzer, 1993; Staudacher, 1991; Williamson, 1978). Treatment concludes with a return to couples therapy, which builds upon the changes developed in earlier phases.

GRIEF WORK

Grief work is a central aspect of the treatment for abandoned sons. Investigating the son's relationship history will establish that a series of losses have occurred and how the mourning process has evolved or stopped. Helping an abandoned son grieve his actual and fantasy losses is perhaps the single greatest clinical challenge. The losses include the actual father, the ideal or fantasy father, aspects of childhood and adolescence, and other intimate relationships.

I invite the son in these initial individual meetings to introduce me vicariously to his father as he has experienced him. Inquiry into the nature of the father-son relationship will precipitate feelings of anger and sadness for most men. Asking how the son resembles or is different from his father usually evokes strong feelings. I ask sons to bring in photographs of their fathers, of the two of them together, or family portraits, gifts the father have given to the son bring practical and symbolic meaning into the therapy.

Open grieving goes against individual, family, and cultural imprinting for men. Grieving feels alien to men, especially allowing others (spouse, children, father, friends, or therapist) to see the tears, rage, and shame that are parts of their clandestine, disowned self.

Another aspect of grieving occurs while exploring the family-of-origin rules imposed on the son. These rules are part of the legacy that binds the son and inhibits him from being fully intimate. A typical rule in father-absent families is not to inquire or talk about the father. This mundane rule of silence further solidifies the societal message for boys not to be emotionally or verbally expressive. Silence within the family about the father may lead to the unspoken becoming unspeakable, which often evolves into, or coexists with, shame. Family rules in these types of situations protect the mysteriously absent father and harm his children and former partner.

One of the difficult aspects of these therapies is that by confronting and dispelling early family-of-origin rules, the abandoned son may flee both the treatment and his relationship. The creation of a positive therapeutic alliance is the foundation upon which the treatment can successfully proceed. The rage and shame that surface can get misdirected. Labeling these feelings as part of the absent father problem helps the son clarify and direct them

toward the source. Wives, mothers, and children have too often born the brunt of men's misdirected anger. Containing the anger in the therapy gives the son an added perspective. The therapist can model and set limits regarding appropriate ways to express anger (Cullen & Freeman-Longo, 1995; Lee, 1993; Weisinger, 1985). The therapist can teach the son assertive methods to employ with his father and others. Repeated debriefings of the incidents that generate anger for the son reduce the intensity of his rage, an indication that he is ready to pursue (re)unification.

PREPARATION FOR (RE)UNIFICATION

After a sufficient period of mourning, the next treatment goal is (re)unification between the abandoned son and his absent father. Depending upon the physical availability of the father, variations in treatment can take place. For adult sons who have had contact with their absent father, a focus on reunification is appropriate. For those sons without contact with their father, the goal of mourning will have to suffice.

Preparing the abandoned son to engage the absent father begins with clarifying the son's unspoken wishes. What did he always want to say to his father, to ask his father, to share with his father? What were the impediments to asking or sharing?

Role playing these conversations, utilizing family sculpture, psychodramatic techniques, gestalt, or other active techniques assists the son in rehearsing what he wants to convey to his father.

FATHER-SON THERAPY SESSIONS

Following the preparation, the son invites his father to participate in treatment. In my clinical experience, to date, each invited father has attended a family of origin meeting with his son, or participated in some type of son-father treatment. This speaks to the needs of the absent father as well as the needs of the son. These therapy sessions typically number between one and ten, often with as much as a month or more between sessions, during which specific relationship assignments are completed.

Headley (1977) offers excellent suggestions in how the therapist and client can work together to accomplish a successful invitation. This process focuses on understanding the needs of both generations, conveying in a letter the wish to reunite, and blocks aspects of blame that usually negate progress.

One principle in working with absent fathers is focus on what is within the son's power to relate in the ways that he prefers, regardless of the father's response. The therapeutic effort is not to change the father. The purpose of the treatment is to help the son relate to his absent father in different and preferred ways. The father is not the focus of change, although the

father may change as well.

An abandoned man often says he could never ask his father to participate. Yet, the act of asking is often the climax of the treatment since the son now feels empowered.

Many fathers approach entering family therapy with apprehension or fear, particularly if they belong to a generation in which therapy implied severe mental illness. To their credit, they have embarked on a journey with their sons that often has wide-ranging impact on their own lives.

Based on an intergenerational premise, the needs of the absent father are viewed as identical to those of the abandoned son, that is, a need to increase his capacity for self-esteem and intimacy in his family, to initiate and respond to the needs of his partner and children, and to become more emotionally expressive. The father would need to grieve the loss of his father, (re)connect with his partner, and bond with his son.

Since the fathers share with their sons some degree of longing (usually unexpressed and often unacknowledged), the opportunity to "help" their son is an attractive offer. It reinforces their self-concept as a good father, even if the evidence is obviously contrary. For those fathers who know they have failed their sons in some way, it affords another chance.

Once the father has committed to the treatment, the task becomes to free the son from the earlier relationship constraints. To free himself, the son must talk to his father about the stored-up feelings, thoughts, and wishes from the past. Through this he takes on a realistic view of his father (past and present) that integrates the father's deficits and assets.

The son gains a new image of his father by the process of (re)unification. He has the benefit of watching his father struggle with a difficult relationship task. He hears his father discuss his side of their earlier relationship and whatever pains or dilemmas he experienced.

Unfortunately, some fathers reword their sons. The father may not have changed his earlier abandoning or abusive behaviors. The possibility of greater wounding or disappointment is discussed during the preparation stage, before inviting the father to join the therapy. Rarely is an absent father all that a son wishes or hopes for. Some fathers lack interest, many are relationally incapable, and others abdicated their moral and family responsibilities decades earlier.

ADULT SON/ADULT FATHER RELATIONSHIP

Some fathers and sons reconcile. The next task is employing the newfound intimacy generated in that relationship to help the son. This occurs through the active development of the adult-to-adult relationship and by the father's sharing of his own experiences.

The enhanced adult son-adult father relationship often requires the son to make the initial and subsequent moves towards (re)connection with his

father.² Assessing the benefits to the son occurs in the context of the possible damage from rewounding. Therapies of all types assume a positive outcome. This is not always true for sons trying to form intimate relationships with their fathers.

The usefulness of the father's stated advice to his adult son is of secondary importance. The son need not accept or agree with the content. The effort by the father is his gift to his son. The danger in this stage is that the father will attempt to dominate or impose his beliefs onto his son. When the son can continue to assert himself with his father this stage is completed. If the father is unable to accept his son's adult decisions, or is invalidating to his son in other ways, this phase adjourns.

In the unhappy outcomes the fathers reveal their deficits or lack of interest, and the sons of necessity disconnect and say goodbye to them. A second round of grieving for the abandoned son ensues. The goal is once again to reduce the mystery of his absent father so the son can appropriately attach in his current intimate relationship.

At this point in the treatment, the abandoned son is in a better position to enhance his relationship with his intimate partner. Couples therapy resumes with the original complaints and goals being addressed.

CASE EXAMPLE

His marital therapist referred Mr. P., a 34-year-old businessman, for individual psychotherapy.³ Married for five years, he and his wife separated soon after the birth of Daniel. Mr. P. felt "uneasy" about being a father. While continuing in marital therapy, he has not reunited with his family. He reported that he was worried about increased demands on his time, that he was catching up on things he had missed out on as a child, uncertain about how to be a father, and missing his wife, whose attention was more focused on their son. Mr. P. identified "unfinished business" with his father revolving around feelings of abandonment and anger.

Mr. P. is an only child. When he was six, his father divorced his mother, left without explanation, and has remained absent without any contact since then. His mother was the sole supporter of the family, often working two jobs. Mr. P. was "on his own" and economically self-supporting by age 14.

His initial goal in individual therapy was to understand why he left after his son was born. He also had a strong desire to reunite with his family. In a six-month course of treatment, Mr. P. explored his anger toward his father by talking with his mother, asking questions about his parents' marriage, his father's personality, and what triggered the divorce. He reviewed photos of his father, noticing the physical similarities. He also began a journal of letters addressed to his father in which he was able to express his longing, his questions, his anger and frustration, most poignantly expressed in one letter

as, "I'm not going to let your abandoning me ruin my future!"

As Mr. P. focused on family-of-origin work, he developed a wider range of emotional expression and was able to cry for the first time in his life for what he had missed and still missed. Sharing his grief with his wife helped him to distinguish between his life and his father's life. This separation of past and present allowed him to reconnect with his wife and to build a connection with his infant son.

Mr. P. searched for his father, based on the information that he received from his mother. He contacted his paternal aunt, who had remained in contact with his father. She agreed to help Mr. P. in contacting his father. Mr. P. and his father exchanged letters. Initially, these letters were short, chatty, and just reported the current news to each other. Letters progressed to telephone calls. After several calls, Mr. P. asked his father if he would like to meet in person. Encouraged by their contacts, he agreed to meet for lunch mid-way between their homes.

At follow-up contact three months after his last individual session, Mr. P. was reunited with his family and continuing to see his father. He persisted in couples therapy to help overcome the pains of marital separation and the loss of his father and to enrich his ability to be a father and husband.

SUMMARY

The consequence of father absence reveals its damage when the son attempts to form and sustain an adult intimate relationship. At each developmental stage, the abandoned son typically experiences relationship difficulties that propel him into treatment, usually at the behest of his spouse. Treatment focuses on the reduction of mystery regarding his absent father. This process entails grieving and (re)unification with his father. Following the grieving and reduction of mystery, the son is in a more wholesome position to succeed in his intimate relationship.

NOTES

1. Changes in the American economy since 1940 have also forced mothers to work outside of the home in increasing numbers. Often this means that for single-parent (mother-headed) families, the children are without a parent in the home for much of their day.

2. Bryant (1997) offers a perspective for those interested in father-initiated reunifications.

3. Identifying information has been disguised to ensure confidentiality.

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