

The Father: His Role in Child Development

David B. Lynn

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Researchers in the field of mother-child relationships and maternal deprivation have become household names in child welfare during the last 20 years. The findings of Spitz, Goldfarb, Bowlby, Ainsworth and Rutter have profoundly influenced professional attitudes and practices. By contrast, father-child interactions have been less well analysed and still less well publicised. Lynn's scholarly examination of available research data, including his own studies, goes a long way to correct this imbalance. His message is clear and unequivocal — fathers have roles to play in child development, as important and wide-ranging in their consequences as those played by mothers.

ANALYSIS

Although the book is written as an analysis of contemporary American father-child relationships it has much to say that is relevant to Australian society. Similar social phenomena — rising divorce rates, more single-parent families, the emancipation of women — should provide future researchers with comparative data and give us all food for thought as we observe their consequences at a later stage of development in America. Perhaps we may even be able to avoid some of the more damaging outcomes.

DEVELOPMENTAL PSYCHOLOGIST

The author, a developmental psychologist, divides his analysis into two parts — fathers and cultures, in which he traces the roots of present day American patterns of fatherhood, comparing and contrasting them with cultural experiments in restructuring the family in U.S.S.R., Sweden, and Israel; and the father-child relationship which involves the use of Freudian, Parsonian and learning theories to examine the impact of fathers in a number of crucial developmental areas. In both parts he relies heavily on research already completed or in process, to illustrate and inform his argument — the result is an invaluable list of references covering 32 pages!

FATHERS IN AMERICA

Fathers in America, and perhaps in most industrialised societies, are seen in terms of critical factors — absence and detachment because of work demands; the fragmentation of the family because of separate interests; the knowledge explosion and the rapidity of change; the changing nature of sex roles; and divorce. All of these serve to lessen the impact of the father on family activity. Space does not permit a detailed examination of these phenomena but Lynn's comments on the impact of Women's Liberation movements are interesting. Whilst conceding the justness of the cause he fears that in America at least, in the short run, casualties in the form of human misery from the conflict brought about by the movement will be high. As women's latent resentment towards men surfaces there could be an acceleration in the breakdown rate in male-female relationships.

INFLUENCE OF FATHERS

The influence of fathers on achievement, vocational choice, creativity, moral development, ag-

gression and delinquency, build up a profile of the many subtle and direct ways in which parents mould their child's development. Of particular interest is the scrutiny of the popular belief "like father, like son" implying that sons are more similar to their fathers than to their mothers. An examination of the research data shows that although sons usually seem highly motivated to pattern after their fathers, he is frequently so unavailable to them that they often cannot in fact model after him closely. This lack of availability is often associated with a high rate of delinquency in boys particularly where separation occurred at an early age.

ABSENT FATHER

The chapter on the Absent Father does much to underline the traumas for both partners in a broken relationship without minimising the impact on the children. As well as confirming the all too frequent harmful consequences of absent fathers in terms of relationships and mental health, research shows a relationship with women's failure to reach orgasm and to alcoholism and suicide attempts, absence also seems to diminish mathematical skills in boys and to lower motivation to achieve in mechanical skills.

STRONGLY ARGUED CASE

The book ends with a strongly argued case for increasing services for single parent families and a plea to us all "to join with the professionals in arousing the nation's consciousness to the pressing problem of supplying every child with the closest approximation to a secure and loving family the nation can afford".

This is a well written, thought provoking book, which should become a valuable resource to all those engaged in work with families.