
The Good, The Bad and The Myths - what is said about fathers

Jimmy Binns

In examining the good, the bad and the myths about fathers, we may come across things which we find difficult to hear and accept. Indeed, even our long-held beliefs and attitudes may be challenged. Some of us will find this uncomfortable, but in the words of Tony Soprano (the TV Mafia Boss): "It's your problem. For you to deal with."

Below you will find a few examples of some of these "good, bad and myths" about fathers and fatherhood.

The Good ...

- ❑ Men are no less driven to be fathers than women are to be mothers. Choosing a mate is choosing someone who will provide the best opportunity for your children (the genome) to survive at their fittest. To this end, fathers play an important role in supporting the mother [Sapolsky 1998]. Do we recognise this?
- ❑ The majority of fathers find being present at the birth of their child a very emotional and fulfilling experience [McKeown 2001].
- ❑ Fathers and mothers benefit significantly from post-natal childcare classes [Matthey et al 2002]
- ❑ Fathers contribute to the social and emotional development of children. Responsive, warm and consistent attention, as well as fair discipline, all provide a safe environment for children to learn and emotionally develop. Fathers are more than able to do this in the absence of a mother and vice versa [Golombok 2004].
- ❑ A positive parent can ameliorate the effects of a depressed, stressed or ill parent. For example, fathers of children whose mothers are depressed instinctively become the key player in teaching children language skills [Kaplun, Dungan & Zinser 2004].
- ❑ Children are affected by the quality of fathering not the quantity [Strazdins et al 2004].

The Bad ...

- ❑ Teenagers engage in sex with only the short-term consequences in mind. The rate of unplanned teenage pregnancies is alarming. How do we encourage more responsible attitudes in sexually active teenagers? (Parliamentary Report 1999)
- ❑ Mothers still do most of the domestic tasks after the birth of a first child [Gjerdingen & Center 2003; Wood & Repetti 2004].
- ❑ Women are as abusive as men in relationships, although more women are injured by men [Straus & Gelles 1986; Gelles & Straus 1988 & 1990; Langhinrichsen et al 1995; Harwell & Spence 2000; Headey, Scott & de Vaus 1996/97; Carrado et al 1996; Steinmetz 1981].

- ❑ Domestic violence, as well as harsh, unfair, unjust and authoritarian parenting, damages the emotional and psychological development of children [Chang et al 2003; Guille 2004; Perez-Albeniz & Joaquin de Paul 2004; Wolfe et al 2003].
- ❑ Poor parenting by fathers leaves children at risk of delinquency in adolescence [Herrera & McCloskey 2001].

... How do we challenge men and women to seek help at the earliest sign of abuse in a relationship, and challenge and support perpetrators to change rather than demonising and criminalising them?

The Myths ...

- ❑ Fathers have equal access to pre-natal classes - but why are the majority of them held during the day? Fathers now have some paternity rights in employment law - yet few are able to avail of these rights as they often incur a financial loss. Do primary care providers acknowledge fathers by writing to them directly or is this done through the mother - the father being treated as an annex to the mother? Can this be improved? [McKeown 2001; Lewis 2000].
- ❑ A teenage father cannot be responsible - wrong! The vast majority of teenage fathers see the birth of their child as a positive contribution to their lives. Children add meaning to life [Foster 2004; Thompson & Crase 2004].
- ❑ Only fathers abuse children - wrong! More mothers abuse children than fathers [USA Department of Health and Human Services 1999] because they spend more time with them, with fewer resources, and under greater stress [Creighton 2002].
- ❑ Children are negatively affected by divorce - yet children can cope with divorce and change. It is the decline in the quality of parenting which impacts most on children [Hetherington & Kelly 2002; Rutter 1994].

. ... How do we dispel these myths? How do we support fathers to stay engaged with their children beyond separation? This involves changing the attitudes of social support services and the judiciary.

And Finally ...

Children are good for fathers. Researchers in Sweden found higher mortality rates in lone fathers living without their children than fathers living with their children. Childless men were also more at risk of premature mortality than fathers [Weitof, Burstrom & Rosen 2004].

May I take this opportunity to thank everyone for sitting with the challenges they experienced to their own attitudes and perceptions of fathers and for engaging with today's work.

I can be contacted by any of the means provided at the end of this paper should you wish to offer feedback or comment.

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Jimmy Binns
Man Akin
163 Templemore Avenue
Belfast BT4 4FQ
Tel: (028) 90 466338
Email: jamesbinns@btopenworld.com