

# Drug Free Kids: Why Fathers Make a Difference

*By Randell D. Turner, PhD*

*"I realize that you don't know me and I'm only a face in a crowd of teenagers... . Why don't I have a father like you? You made me cry today when you talked about the relationship you have with your daughter and how you show her you love her. I never cry. You learn not to in my family. All I want is a chance... . I wish I had a father. I wish someone loved me like you love your family. You don't know how badly I want to understand things, how much I want a chance to, and it may sound stupid but if someone would just hold me for one minute... no strings... no games... well I really can't explain it."*

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Nationally known youth motivational speaker Josh McDowell receives hundreds of letters like this one from Lori, a high school junior, after he speaks to students. Most letters are desperate cries for help from fearful, lonely and hurting teens. The phrase they repeat most is "I wish I had a dad like you!"

Our culture's absence of the father figure as man, mentor and trusted guardian has had a tremendous impact on children. And one of the most urgent social problems we face is substance abuse among our nation's children. "Fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation. It is the leading cause of declining child welfare in our society. It is also the engine driving our most urgent social problems," writes David Blankenhorn, founder and president of the Institute for American Values and author of *Fatherless America*, (HarperCollins, 1996).

According to recent studies, fathers play a major role in whether or not their children choose to abuse alcohol and drugs.

In May, 2000, the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA) surveyed 2,000 teens and 1,000 parents and found that teens in two-parent families who have fair to poor relationships with their fathers are 68 percent more likely to smoke, drink and use drugs. By comparison, teens raised by single mothers alone were only 30 percent more likely to smoke, drink and use drugs. Furthermore, the study showed that 71 percent of teens reported to have an excellent or very good relationship with their mothers, while only 58 percent said they had such a relationship with their fathers. More than twice as many teens, 56 percent vs. 26 percent found it easier to talk to their mothers than their fathers about drugs.

"Fathers play a pivotal role in turning their kids off illegal drugs, alcohol and tobacco," said former White House Drug Policy Director Barry McCaffrey. "They need to be straightforward and understand that what they say to their children matters deeply and will have a lifelong impact."

The news media also drew attention to the study. Quoted in *USA Today*, Joseph Califano Jr., former U.S. Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, and current president of the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, said, "The statistics should be a wake-up call for dads across America to become more engaged with their children." Headlines in the *Akron Beacon Journal* read, "OK Dads, listen up! The key to winning the war on drugs rests not with police or laws, but with you!"

Family psychologist, Beth Erickson, PhD, in Santa Fe and Albuquerque, New Mexico and author of *Longing for Dad: Father Loss and Its Impact* (HCI 1998), writes that father loss/hunger masquerades as other symptoms including addictions.

CASA studies have shown that more than 14 million teens age 12-17 have friends who drink and use marijuana, friends who have used acid, cocaine or heroin, friends who can buy marijuana conveniently, and have friends that expect to use an illegal drug in the future. That translates to 60 percent of teens that are at moderate or high risk to abuse substances.

### **Society's attitude about fathers**

The CASA study found that mothers influence their children's important

decisions three times as often as do fathers and are more likely to have talks with their children about drugs. And, during the last fifty years American society has not recognized, encouraged nor supported the importance of fatherhood.

"Too often, people think of the parenting role as the mother's job, and this reminds us that the family is the children, the mother and the father where possible," Dr. H. Westley Clark, director of the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment at the Department of Health and Human Services, said.

For years, as a society we have researched, funded and supported the role of mothers, yet when it came to fathers, too often they were viewed as optional equipment, nice, but not essential in nurturing a healthy child. Having said that, fathers must assume some responsibility for society's apathy toward fatherhood, because more often than not, men and fathers in leadership haven't recognized their own importance of fatherhood, so why should the rest of society?

The second and potentially most damaging element to healthy relationships between fathers and their children is the emphasis on the lesser qualities that comprise the male stereotype — or what has been called "toxic masculinity." Toxic masculinity is what happens when a man's aggressive characteristics become the measure of what it means to be male in our society. We have allowed society to place greater emphasis on specific characteristics of what it means to be a man/father, all the while de-emphasizing the characteristics that nurture relationships and family.

An illustration of society's fixation on toxic masculinity lies in the rise in popularity in "sports" like professional wrestling, toughest-man competitions and death match video games that children, especially boys, play for hours. For years the call to arms for men and fathers has been the opening theme music to "Monday Night Football." The call to arms for the next generation of men and fathers has become "Let's get ready to rumblllllle!" Consequently, these are the images that have and are shaping the character of men and fathers in our society, placing greater emphasis on the "warrior" image instead of the characteristics of teacher, mentor and friend.

### **Educating fathers**

If children are going to benefit from the influence of good relationships with their fathers, we have to begin by helping to educate fathers in two essential areas:

1. the positive effects that a father's influence has on his child's development
2. how to develop loving and nurturing relationships with their children

Why focus on these two areas? The sad fact is that most fathers just don't know how they influence their child's development and therefore do not see how vital they are to their children. Furthermore, many fathers don't understand the importance of developing and maintain loving, nurturing relationships with their children because they did not experience it during their own childhood. Additionally, society has not modeled nor reinforced the importance of the father/child relationship, and therefore fathers have little from which to learn.

Yet research published in *Personal and Social Skills Training: Cognitive-Behavior Approaches to Substance Abuse Prevention* states that "the acquisition of adequate social skills appears to play an important role in both psychological adjustment and psychosocial development."

Children need basic interpersonal skills for confident, responsive and mutually beneficial relationships. These are among the most important skills that an individual must learn.

A lack of social competence may lead to rejection and social isolation, which may in turn result in poor psychological adjustment. Individuals generally begin the acquisition of basic social skills during childhood, and as they mature, their social skills generally increase.

Therefore, if the acquisition of basic social skills begins during childhood, what and how do fathers contribute to teaching these skills? Many fathers beset on answering this question find that it might become a pivotal event that leads them to begin the process of changing their behavior and a defining moment that changes they way they sees themselves as fathers.

Many studies have shown how fathers influence their child's well being and self-esteem. According to Yogman, Kindlon and Ears, in "*Involvement and Cognitive Behavioral Outcomes of Premature Infants*" in the *Journal*

of *American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychology* 34 (1995), "premature infants whose fathers spent more time playing with them had better cognitive outcomes at age 3." At six months, children whose fathers had been actively involved from birth scored higher on a test of mental and motor development than children whose fathers were not involved during the first eight weeks of life. They also managed stress better during their school years (Pedersen, *Father-Infant Relationship*). Esterbrooks and Goldberg in "*Toddler Development in the Family; Impact of Father Involvement and Parenting Characteristics*" (1984), found that children who were securely attached to their fathers were better problem solvers than children who were not.

### **Some ways in which fathers influence their children**

Research tells us that a father influences his children in many ways. Most notably a father exerts influence in the following areas: 1 2

- \* The intellectual ability of his children,
- \* The behavior his children will model,
- \* The genetic background his children will receive,
- \* His children's ethnic heritage and their position in the family structure,
- \* The occupational choices his children make,
- \* The material resources his children are left with when he is gone,
- \* The ways his children will behave toward their offspring.

Studies on a father's influence on his child's pro-social behavior reveals that:

- \* Even in high-crime, inner-city neighborhoods, well over 90 percent of children from safe, stable, two-parent homes do not become delinquents.<sup>3</sup>
- \* Whether the outcome variable is cognitive development, sex-role development, or psychosocial development; children are better off when their relationship with their fathers is close and warm.<sup>4</sup>
- \* When both boys and girls are reared with engaged fathers, they demonstrate "a greater ability to take initiative and maintain self-control."<sup>5</sup>
- \* Children with an involved father are exposed to more varied social experiences and are more intellectually advanced than those who only have regular contact with their mother.<sup>6</sup>

Attempts to understand the 'active ingredient' in father's play that

promotes peer competence have revealed that children learn critical lessons about how to recognize and deal with highly charged emotions in the context of playing with their fathers. Fathers, in effect, give children practice in regulating their emotions and recognizing others' emotional cues. 7

Teaching adolescents to develop personal and social skills through the cognitive-behavior approach to substance abuse prevention has proven to be effective when facilitated by teacher, counselors and mentors. And we now know that a loving father who remains actively involved has a positive effect on his child's social, cognitive and intellectual development and self-esteem. Then, logic dictates that a substance abuse prevention program must be designed to incorporate fathers and their influence on their children.

### **Men and relationships**

CASA tells us that teens who have a fair to poor relationships with their fathers are 68 percent more likely to smoke, drink and use drugs. The key word is "relationships."

Unfortunately, men and fathers are generally not as adept at developing or maintaining good relationships as women are. Studies have shown that this is partially due to it not being modeled by their fathers growing up, if their father was around, and because our society has perpetuated the myth that men are not supposed to show their emotions. Consequently, men have so embraced this myth that it commonly affects all of their relationships, not just their relationship with their children.

But fathers need to know that they are not the only ones who have failed in developing relationships with their children. *Time* magazine published a report to the President, which stated, "American families and their children are in trouble, trouble so deep and pervasive as to threaten the future of our nation. The source of the trouble is nothing less than a national neglect of children and those primarily engaged in their care ... American parents!"

To avert trouble, a father must recognize how vital it is for him to develop close intimate relationships with his children now, before his children become a statistic. The key to a father keeping his children safe from drug addiction is by developing and maintaining a loving, nurturing

relationship with his children and thereby reinforcing their self-esteem. A 1996 study, *Effects of Family Structure on the Adolescent Separation-Individualism Process*, by McCurdy and Avaham, showed that adolescents between 14 and 19 have higher self-esteem and less depression when they have a greater intimacy with their fathers.

### **What kids need from their dads**

Close relationships between father and child are not built overnight. They require time, personal growth, commitment and sacrifice on the part of fathers. Fathers will need to learn more about their children, their different stages of development, how to give and receive affection and skills in listening and communication. They need to be active daily in co-parenting their children with the mother, not just when they are asked to do so. Fathers need to spend time with each child, actively listening and talking about the child's area of interest, which means they need to pay more attention to a child's television shows, music and school activities.

Young children crave attention, love and affection. What many fathers fail to realize is that these needs do not change as the child grows older. The difference is the way a father expresses that attention, love and affection. While teenagers may act as if they don't want or need a father's attention and love, they do. Fathers need to remember that although their teenage son or daughter may look like an adult, they lack the wisdom born of years of experience and don't always know what is best for them. But they won't accept guidance from you if there is no relationship. The following letter from Danny, a 17-year-old, illustrates the dichotomy that teens often feel about their relationships with their parents:

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*"Sometimes I feel so alone, like no one cares.*

*My folks live in their own world and I live in mine. It didn't always seem to be this way. I know it sounds crazy, but I want them to leave me alone and yet I want to be part of their lives. Most of the time they do leave me alone and it gets pretty lonely."*

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Danny's words illustrate the difficulty some teens have in navigating the strong currents of becoming an adult. He wants them to leave him alone — yet wants to be a part of their lives. To build a strong relationship with

his teen, a father needs to remember what it was like when he was a teenager, his hopes, his fears, his lost loves and his dreams for the future. Their child faces the same feelings; only today, it comes at light speed, demanding an immediate response. Without a father that loves and accepts them unconditionally, whom they can turn to for guidance, teens will stumble along, seeking out advice from anyone who will give them the love and attention they crave.

Therefore, it is vital to help fathers learn what it takes to develop and maintain a close intimate relationship with their children. Yet any substance abuse prevention or recovery program that attempts to teach fathers how to develop loving and involved relationships with their children should not overwhelm fathers with too much head knowledge and not enough heart knowledge. Keep it clear, straightforward and skill-building oriented.

Fathers, like most men, learn better, and retain information longer when they apply what was shared as immediately as possible, taking advantage of their instinctive visual learning.

An effective program that teaches fathers to develop the following skills would be extremely effective for the fathers and beneficial to the children as well.

\* A child needs a father's daily involvement.

This could include playing or working with them, attending their children's activities, tending to daily routines, or just spending unstructured time with them. The father is engaged in the life of the children. Fathers who are involved in their children's lives tend to go out of their way to interact with them. They may give up some of their own activities that are important to them in order to gain more time with their children.

These fathers intentionally engage in time spent in positive interaction with their children on a daily basis. They tend to see sharing their day as an important aspect of being a good father.

\* A child needs a father's acceptance.

A father's acceptance helps the child to believe that he will love them no matter what. A father's acceptance teaches a child that he or she is loved

for who they are rather than for what they do. When teens feel accepted by their father, they are more likely to be vulnerable and transparent, opening up greater trust between them and their father.

\* A child needs a father's affection.

A father can express affection in many different ways, though loving words or an appropriate touch communicates volumes to a child. When a father shows affection to his child, he gives them the sense of loveability, that they are worth loving.

\* Children need their fathers to be consistent.

Fathers who are consistent, maintain a certain level of regularity both in their personal characteristics and in their fathering habits. People around him know what to expect from him. They will be diligent in performing their fathering role even when it costs them or they have to put in extra effort to maintain that pattern. Their interaction with their children does not vary regardless of the circumstances.

\* A child needs a father's availability.

When fathers make themselves available to their children, it gives them a sense of importance. When fathers are not available it tells the child, "Yes, I love you, but other things still come ahead of you." Therefore, a father who is there when his child or teenager needs him assures the child that he or she is important to their father and it keeps the father connected with the child.

The key to a child's safety is the quality and quantity of the relationship that he or she has with Father. This is the best prevention for keeping children from getting involved in drugs, alcohol, smoking, teen pregnancy and criminal behavior.

So if we are going to make good use of the findings of the CASA study, we must encourage and challenge fathers to become intimately involved in the lives of their children. They are part of the powerful team that Joseph Califano heralds as a largely untapped resource.

"Parent power may be the greatest underutilized resource in our nation's battle to give our children the will and skills to say no to drugs," said Califano.

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