Absentee Fathers in Black America: Where Are They?

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&

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“Kids who grow up without a father never experience that special sense of security and the enhanced feeling of belonging, that comes from having a father in the home. So they seek it elsewhere. They don’t get that sweet feeling of triumph that comes from a father’s approval, or the warmth of the old man’s hug, or wisdom to be drawn from his discipline.”

**Absenteeism**

- By definition the term absentee means to be absent or to keep away; chronic absence.
  
  *(Merriam-Webster Dictionary)*

- Missing in action

  *(Ron Collier)*
This term has been created as an appliqué for our black men who are also fathers. This is not a new term but is one that has been brought to a level of societal consciousness that it speaks negatively of the vast majority of fathers who are missing in action, keeping away, or chronically lost and out of place. Our goal in this discussion is to bring to light why we have this issue of rampant absenteeism in our black fathers. We should understand that historically we were saddled with this by historical events. The next few slides will give insight as given to me by my program participants why in many instances fathers have been missing in action.
Why are Fathers missing?

• The system
• Multiple Families
• No Money, no child
• Operating below the wire
• Child as a pawn
• The thrill is gone
• Adversarial Relationships
• Family Interference
• No model for marriage / marriage issues
• Spiritual or religious upheaval
The System

There are fathers that voice their concerns that the system (Child Support Courts) is stacked against them and the only way they can be a father is they pay money which they don’t have due to lack of work or lack of work that pays a living wage that will allow them to not just exist but to live after Child support payments. Due to this mindset many become absent of all information that is needed to hold and keep them accountable as fathers.
Multiple Families
There are some men who have fathered children by more than one woman, not all but in many cases they have to choose which woman they will be with. In the case of some men that means the other child/children are left out of the fathering picture. A fathers I work with states “man if you new how mean my old lady can be if she finds out I am helping the other kids you would leave them (other children) alone too.” (Demetrius, Headstart father)
No money, No children

A great number of fathers are absent due to the fact their self-esteem is very low due to no income. They connect money with being a good father. The mother also has this mindset in some instances. There is a correlation in their minds between money and parenting. Therefore some mothers think if the father can’t contribute money we don’t need him.
Operating Below the Line

This term is given to fathers that are around but it is as if they have fallen from the face of the earth. They never work in a structured job in the system, never better themselves via credit purchases, don’t have a stable address and are not looking to be found in the system. These men are in many cases still in the lives of their children. They will come around but are not a constant presence
The thrill is gone...

When the relationship goes sour between the parents this many times signals the end of the fathering process for the children. The father takes on the mindset that if he can’t have a relationship with the mother then she can have the children and raise them by herself. Unfortunately these same men move on to another relationship and carries the same mindset.
Adversarial Relationship

Many times the relationship between the parents don’t just end they become each other adversary. It is as if they discover they are really enemies and the children become a part of this dynamic which in most cases gives the mom more leverage and the father doesn’t want to give ground so he just disconnects from the children along with their mother. In this period the mother may decide they are better off and the children’s relationship with the father become minimal to none
Family Interference

If the family of either side get too involved it can become a detriment to the relationship that the children have with the father. If the father’s family take attitude we are too good for her then children many times bare the brunt of this action. Subsequently when the mother’s family have this similar mindset they will usually find a way to keep the father from being active in the lives of the children
No Model for Marriage/ Marriage Issues

Many men have not seen marriages in their immediate family structure therefore they don’t have a conceptual model for marrying or working through issues. If they have gotten married. When thing begin to go wrong rather than make a stand and work things out they in many cases bail out of the relationship leaving the family unit to make it the best way it can.
Spiritual or Religious Upheaval

As a people we have fallen away from what carried us through many trials and tribulations that is the Church. In today’s society man have fallen away in great numbers from their spiritual guidepost or religious center and it has carried over into the family. What we see is the father is no the head now but is rapidly becoming the tail.
Tragedy of Father Absence

90% of homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes. [US D.H.H.S., Bureau of the Census]
Tragedy of Absent Father con’t

80% of rapists motivated with displaced anger come from fatherless homes. [Criminal Justice & Behaviour, Vol 14, pp. 403-26, 1998]
Tragedy of Absent Father con’t

71% of pregnant teenagers lack a father. [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services press release, Friday, March 26, 2006]
Tragedy of Absent Father con’t

63% of youth suicides are from fatherless homes. [US D.H.H.S., Bureau of the Census]
Tragedy of Absent Father con’t

85% of children who exhibit behavioral disorders come from fatherless homes. [Center for Disease Control]
Tragedy of Father Absent con’t

90% of adolescent repeat arsonists live with only their mother. [Wray Herbert, “Dousing the Kindlers,” Psychology Today, January, 1985, p. 28]
Tragedy of Father Absent con’t

71% of high school dropouts come from fatherless homes. [National Principals Association Report on the State of High Schools]
Tragedy of Father Absent con’t

75% of adolescent patients in chemical abuse centers come from fatherless homes.

[Rainbows for all God’s Children]
Tragedy of Father Absent con’t

70% of juveniles in state operated institutions have no father. [US Department of Justice, Special Report, Sept. 2006]
Tragedy of Father Absent con’t

85% of youths in prisons grew up in a fatherless home. [Fulton County Georgia jail populations, Texas Department of Corrections, 2004]
Tragedy of Father Absent con’t

Fatherless boys and girls are: twice as likely to drop out of high school; twice as likely to end up in jail; four times more likely to need help for emotional or behavioral problems. [US D.H.H.S. News Release, March 26, 2006]
Perceptions of Black Fathers

- **Who** defines a “Black Father”?  
- **What** defines a “Black Father”?  
- **How** is a “Black Father” defined?  
- **When** is a “Black Father” acceptable?
Who defines a “Black Father”?  

MEDIA  

• We live in a society “where black maleness is in some ways the definition of failure" ... therefore fathers as black men are often viewed as failures.  
• "He's just my baby-daddy," which diminishes the role of father and excludes his importance.
Black Fathers defined

BLACK WOMEN

• “perception that Black men are irresponsible.”
• Negative Black women who are angry, bitter and nasty
• Denigration of Black men
• Lack of respect
What defines a Black Father?

BEHAVIOR

- His relationship with his children
- His handling of family responsibility
- His “being there in good times and in bad times”
- His leadership; his presence; his love; his heart
- His Power (*his depth as a man*)
- His partnership with his children’s mother
How is a Black Father Defined?

PERFORMANCE: RESILENCY, SURVIVAL and SUCCESS

• “A black man able to take many lickens and keep ticking”. (but the reality is why do we have to take a licking?)

• Ability to cope with race, class, and gender oppression in patriarchal societies

• Ability to reconstruct masculinity through the context of his experiences
When is a Black Father Acceptable?

- When he is ...
  - Financially responsible
  - Physically responsible, *i.e.*, present
  - Positive role model
  - Dedicated to his wife and children, *i.e.*, fidelity
Strong Black Fathers!!!

During the 1970s there was a popular TV show that all blacks loved about a poor black family living in a housing project. But what made the show so enjoyable was the fact that there was a beautiful strong black father figure who loved his family and was indeed in command and authority over the trials and struggles they were overcoming.
Good Times
Actor John Amos was brilliant in his role as a black father who, although poor, was a man of virtue, honor, honesty, and integrity. He loved his afro wearing wife and all of his children; including his oldest son who was the somewhat immature comic of the family. This black father refused to let society's numerous tricks and traps, entrap him and his beloved family!!! The name of the show was Good Times.
• But the tragedy was that white supremacy once again, reared its ugly head, and stepped in and destroyed this "black authority figure". John Amos was removed from the show because of the show's producers and directors growing emphasis on the "silly buffoonery" of the son; played by professional comedian J.J. Walker.

• So, as a result, and in typical racist style, John Amos' character of a strong black father and role model was killed in the show and their family became the now proverbial "single mom household".
A Loving Black Family destroyed
This TV show was the first and only "real" black family that had been portrayed since television was invented in the 1950s!!!! Yet, there were numerous shows about white families with father figures in authority. *Leave It To Beaver, My Three Sons, and Father Knows Best,* to name just a few!!!!
THE COSBY SHOW
What AGAIN Happened?

The Cosby Show premiered on September 20, 1984 and shot to the top of the ratings almost immediately. The series finished third in the ratings its first season (1984-85), and first for the next four seasons. The Cosby Show fell from the very top of the ratings after its sixth season (1989-90), when it finished second behind another family-oriented situation comedy, Roseanne.
Longevity of Show

The Cosby Show ran for 200 Episodes!
Black Fathers as Non-Traditionalist

• Scores of Caregiving Measures, i.e., babysitter, playmate
• Making financial provision and disciplinarian
• Sense of community and family achievement
• Significance of kinship, i.e., generative black fathering
• Fewer Black fathers are biological fathers to the children they are raising
Black Fathers as Non-Traditionalist

- Black father roles more flexible than white fathers
- White fathers more likely to be in the delivery room than Black fathers
- Black fathers more likely to define their role of father in relation to their relationship with their child’s biological mother
Why are Black Fathers Absent?

• Structural conditions
• Racism and poverty
• The welfare state
• Incarceration
• Death
• Rejection
Eliminating Absenteeism

Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord
And he shall the turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to the fathers, lest I come smite the earth with a curse.

Malachi 4: 5-6
Conclusions

• Black fathers are diverse and should not be defined by Euro-perspectives

• The significance of fathers, grandfathers and other fathers in helping their sons develop a strong sense of their masculinity

• Fathers can be physically present but emotionally absent; and physically absent, but emotionally present

• Other fathers play an important role in Black communities
Conclusions

• Other fathers are guardians of the next generation and a positive resource in Black communities.

• Mentorship programs for Black children need to be developed and/or strengthened.

• Despite the distortions of healthy parenting in African communities, other fathers and community fathers remain critical for positive and healthy parenting.
Implications for Policy and Practice

• Develop father friendly policies
• Expand definition of father involvement
• Develop strategies to engage with fathers
• Change view of other fathers
• Develop programs around fathers
What Fathers Tell Us...

• “The guilt of not being there... so much shame to my family...I will spend the rest of my life seeking forgiveness”

• “I grew up in a community atmosphere...”
What Fathers Tell Us…

• “it takes a village...we all have a responsibility...it’s not the quantity of time we spend with our children, it’s the quality...”

• “we can help make a difference...by giving back to them...their actions speak louder than words...”
What Fathers Tell Us...

• “I want to be a part of my child’s life....”

• “I want to be a better father than my father was to me...”

• “I didn’t know my father. I want my son to know me. I want him to know that he has a father.”

• “Until this day, I wonder who my father is.”
In Closing

• We all play an important role in advocating for fatherhood. **WE all have a voice in...**
  – Decision-making
  – Policy
  – Parenting
  – Changing societal attitudes, helping Black fathers, strengthening Black family development
  – Eradicating racism, discrimination, prejudice
**In Closing con’t**

The problem of absenteeism in the black family is not going to end immediately, there is no quick fix solution. It has taken us decades to arrive at this place or awareness of a problem that is destroying the black family fabric. As a family unit we must begin not just as practitioner but members of a larger family unit to repair the breach in our family wall.