
The Fatherhood Movement: A Call to Action

Wade F. Horn and David Blankenhorn

David Blankenhorn is founder and president of the New York-based Institute for American Values, a private, nonpartisan organization devoted to research, publication, and education on issues of family well-being and civil society. Along with Dr. Horn and Don Eberly, he helped found the National Fatherhood Initiative and sits on its board. He is the author of the 1995 book *Fatherless America: Confronting Our Most Urgent Social Problem*. He is the married father of three children.

Wade Horn is president and co-founder of the Maryland-based National Fatherhood Initiative, an adjunct faculty member at Georgetown University's Public Policy Institute, and an affiliate scholar with the Hudson Institute. From 1989 to 1993, he served as commissioner for children, youth, and families and chief of the Children's Bureau within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. His newest book is *The Better Homes and Gardens New Father Book*. He and his wife have two daughters.

Horn, Blankenhorn, and Mitchell B. Pearlstein, president of Center of the American Experiment, are the editors of a new book titled *The Fatherhood Movement: A Call to Action* (Lexington, 1999).

Susan Albright is editorial pages editor of the Minneapolis-based *Star Tribune*. She has long been an advocate of innovative, proactive editorial pages that seek both to lead the community and to present diverse viewpoints that arise from the community. She is president of the 600-member National Conference of Editorial Writers and a regional commentator on public television's *NewsHour* with Jim Lehrer. She and her husband have a daughter.

Albright moderated an American Experiment discussion of fatherhood in February 1999.

Susan Albright: *The Fatherhood Movement* is a rich and illuminating book on a complex subject. I found it deeper and much wider than I had anticipated.

As I moved from chapter to chapter, my questions were answered at just about the time I became conscious of them. The fatherhood movement, I began to ponder. Why movement? Are we talking about a motley group of people—from Promise Keepers to welfare reformers, from drum-beating, mystical, Robert Bly-following poets to noncustodial dads upset with the courts—acting separately? No sooner had that thought begun to take shape than Wade Horn took it on in the very first chapter, “Did You Say ‘Movement?’”

Read a little more and you begin to think, Wait a minute, is this really about fathers? Isn’t it fundamentally about the need to rethink marriage?—and magically, the editors provide a discussion of that very subject.

Is it really about males? you wonder. Couldn’t any team of two people bring up kids? We all know people who manage. Lo and behold, here is research on how fathers are different from mothers. Males really are different in a qualitative way in raising children.

The rhythm of this book is uncannily effective.

But what I most appreciated about it goes beyond rhythm and answering the questions you have when you read it. The book has intellectual integrity. It recognizes and addresses counterarguments. Several authors do not have a point of view in an ideological way at all, but rather are reporting on research

results such as the following:

- A father’s skill as a playmate is one of the primary predictors of cognitive development.
- High levels of empathy in forty-one-year-old adults were found to be associated with only one factor that they had in common: paternal involvement when they were five.
- The better the father-child relationship when a child is three years old, the longer-lasting relationships the child will have with other children when he is five.

Let’s start our discussion with the indicators that have convinced you of the need for a fatherhood movement. Many of us who have worked in companies over the past twenty-five years have seen tremendous—and I would say positive—changes in the way companies treat men, and in the ways men are able to interact with their children. Dads are now leaving work to attend recitals. My older colleagues say there’s no way could they have done that in the 1950s. So why is fatherhood America’s worst social problem?

Wade Horn: We have two competing trends in America today. You alluded to one of them: many men today are engaged in their children’s lives in a very profound way that the typical father of a generation or two ago perhaps was not so engaged. They are the ones who take time off when a child is born or adopted, the ones you see in physicians’ offices with their kids, the ones who are insisting that accommodations be made in the workplace so they can spend time with their children.

The other trend is this: four out of ten American children do not live in the same household as their fathers. That has never happened before in the history of the United States. The fathers aren't absent because of disease, they aren't off fighting a war, they haven't died. They just live somewhere else.

The consequences of father absence are profound. We know that children who grow up without an involved, committed, engaged father in their lives are at least five times more likely to be poor; two to three times more likely to fail at school; two to three times more likely to have an emotional or behavioral problem; more likely, if they are boys, to get in trouble with the law as teenagers; more likely, if they are girls, to become pregnant as teenagers. On almost every measure you can imagine, children who grow up without a father in their home are at greater risk of poor outcomes.

So on the one hand, we have fathers who are more involved than ever before, and on the other hand, we have more absent fathers. The challenge for the fatherhood movement is to encourage the one trend and to discourage the other.

There is a compelling need to deal with this issue. As a clinical psychologist, I have seen the tragic results of fatherlessness—not just in the statistics, but also in the lives of individual children whose fathers are not there. We spent two or three decades pretending there wasn't an elephant in the room. The elephant is fatherlessness.

Susan Albright: Is it really a father

problem, or is it a marriage problem?

David Blankenhorn: It's both. About 33 percent of the children born today are born outside of marriage. There is also a very high divorce rate: about half of the marriages entered into this year are likely to end in divorce.

So you're right: partly it's a fundamental failure to establish the stable male/female child-rearing unit. That's probably the most important social institution in any society, and when it falls apart, we have these problems.

At the same time, it's specifically a male problem because it is usually the fathers who leave. We talk about families, women, children, children in poverty, mothers working, day care. But what about the fathers? That often seems to be the missing part of the picture, so we emphasize that perspective as a way to get a fresh purchase on the overall issue.

Susan Albright: Other recent movements—civil rights, feminism, gay rights—tend to be about seeking individual rights. Environmentalists seek protections the government can provide. The fatherhood movement is quite different: you are asking men to be more responsible.

David Blankenhorn: We don't want to blame women or feminists or the government. No, it's us, the men. Many of us are walking away from our children's lives. We need to be more responsible for our children.

Wade Horn: The language of the twentieth century has been largely a language of rights—and that is not all

bad. The civil rights movement was very important. As the father of two daughters, I think the feminist movement was very important as well. But in contrast to the social movements of the nineteenth century, which spoke the language of responsibility and obligations to others, twentieth-century movements have spoken the language of rights. The fatherhood movement is different in that we speak the language of responsibility. Can a social movement go back to a nineteenth-century language and succeed in a century that is more comfortable with and invested in the language of rights? It's an open question.

The fatherhood movement is distinctive from the men's movement, which is focused inside—how am I feeling and growing as a man?—and from the fathers' rights movement, which is made up primarily of divorced men and unwed fathers who are seeking to reestablish their rights to be involved fathers. We are not suggesting that those movements are illegitimate, but our focus is different: we want to improve the well-being of children.

Susan Albright: Dan Quayle's remarks about Murphy Brown defined an enemy in the same way that, say, some feminists saw men as the enemy, or an environmentalist might see a corporation as evil.

David Blankenhorn: The language of "family values" unfortunately got sucked into partisan politics. You will almost never hear those words cross my lips, or Wade's. They are attack words. We stay away from that. We don't care

whether you are a Republican or a Democrat, liberal or conservative, black or white. Our focus is encouraging more men to be more committed to their kids. We can accommodate a wide range of differences.

Wade Horn: The only thing one can't do, and still be a part of this movement, is think fathers don't matter. There are people who make the argument that if we had enough economic support systems, we could do just fine without fathers. We disagree. If you think fathers don't matter, then you are not part of this movement.

David Blankenhorn: There is a point of view that says fathers are helpful as a second pair of hands—fresh troops—but are not really necessary. They're like white picket fences: nice, but you can get along okay without them.

Wade Horn: This is separate from the issue of social support systems for fatherless families, and this is where we sometimes get misinterpreted. Some people say, If you think fathers matter, then you must think that single mothers don't deserve support, and what about the fatherless kids? We support that kind of work, but overarching it must be, in our view, an ideal. And we are very clear on what that ideal ought to be: for every child, a legally and morally responsible mother and a legally and morally responsible father. David and I occupy in this broad, diverse space of the fatherhood movement an additional ideal, which is that it ought to be an in-the-home, love-the-mother, married father.

My ninety-three-year-old grandmother says, "Wade, you make a living saying fathers are important?" I haven't told her yet that I'm now saying marriage is important as well. She would find that extraordinary.

Susan Albright: Maggie Gallagher says in your book that "domicile is destiny" and talks about how even active fathers, after a divorce, tend not to have as much influence on their children as a father who is sitting around watching TV with them and washing dishes with them. Would you talk about the research and the kinds of things that make fathers not just a picket fence or fresh troops?

Wade Horn: Sometimes the objection to our work is this: What if the father is an abusive, horrible ax-murdering guy? We can all agree that an abusive, horrible ax-murdering father is no good. But that is not what we are promoting; we are promoting responsible, committed, loving fathers involved in the lives of their kids.

And it is important that the father be with his children. That is not to deny that millions of noncustodial fathers overcome this challenge every day, but we think that an in-the-home, love-the-mother father is better for the kids than somebody who comes around once every two weeks.

There is a lot of research that shows that children of fathers who are actively involved in their lives do better in the long term, and the earlier the father is involved, the better the child does. Kids who have a strong, warm, loving attachment with the mother do

better than kids who don't. But kids who have a strong, warm, loving attachment with the father as well as the mother do better than kids with a strong attachment to just one parent. And in cases where the mother, for whatever reasons, is not attached to the child, an attached father serves as a safety valve for the child.

Fathers are not just a second pair of hands. The research is increasingly clear that mothers and fathers do different things for children. Take, for example, the different way mothers and fathers hold babies. Mothers hold babies in, while fathers are more likely to hold babies out—to see the world. As kids get older, that translates into fathers tending to specialize in helping them make the transition from the family into the outer world.

There is also a difference in terms of the way moms and dads play with their children. Fathers tend to play rougher. When I went to graduate school in the 1970s, I was told to tell fathers to stop wrestling with their kids. Little boys are more aggressive than little girls, they said, and since there is no biological difference between them (only psychologists who don't have little boys and little girls can say that), these differences in aggressive activity must be learned. The little boys learn aggression when their fathers wrestle with them and don't wrestle with their daughters. Fathers are teaching and modeling aggression, I was told.

We spent ten or fifteen years telling fathers to stop wrestling with their kids. What we are now discovering, however, is that, far from teaching

aggression, this physical playfulness actually teaches kids self-regulation. If the kid gets out of hand and starts to punch or pinch, the father says, Hey, cut it out, slow it down. That teaches the little boy self-regulation: you can go this far, but no further. We are discovering that it works for girls, too. Girls whose fathers wrestle with them do better at school, have higher achievement levels, are more self-confident, have higher self-esteem—because their fathers are not treating them as breakable porcelain dolls.

Many of the differences in the ways that mothers and fathers interact with their kids seem to have positive effects on the child's development.

David Blankenhorn: In a study of the sexual satisfaction of women—is your sexual relationship with your spouse fulfilling, and does it make for a happy and productive relationship?—researchers tried to figure out what made sexual relationships good or bad. Was it qualities that the woman was bringing to the relationship? They looked at self-esteem, cigarette smoking, diets, attitudes about gender roles, working wives and at-home wives.

The single most important predictor of female sexual satisfaction turned out to be a woman's relationship with her father. The women who felt loved and accepted by their fathers when they were children had a greater sense of their own loveworthiness. Twenty or thirty years later, they were confident women who knew they were worthy of love.

Being loved in a good way by the first man in your life helps you believe

that sex can be a great thing with these creatures called males—because, hopefully, you saw a great love between your dad and your mom.

Susan Albright: Weren't there some research indications that men who are active, involved fathers tend to be happier themselves, and to be more effective leaders in their companies?

Wade Horn: Research shows that when men are connected to family and to children, they actually advance farther in their careers. Family seems to be a refueling station: they get filled up emotionally at home and are then more energized in the workplace.

We talk about the importance of fathers in socializing children, but children also help to socialize men. This is not a piece that we should ignore.

I can cite research, but let me give you a word picture instead. Imagine you are the guy in the movie *Grand Canyon* who is hopelessly lost in the worst section of Los Angeles when his car breaks down; his cell phone isn't working, so he has to get out and walk. Imagine you're stuck in this terrible place—every window is broken, every light is out—and you have to walk to get help, and suddenly you see a man in his early twenties walking down the street toward you. It's ten or ten-thirty at night, on a lonely street, nobody else around. Would it make a difference to your sense of security if, as that man got closer, you saw that he was holding the hand of his five-year-old child? A man with a child is not as dangerous as a lone male.

Research shows that when a man experiences the birth of his child, he thinks about being a more positive role model. He straightens out his life: he drinks less, he drugs less, he carouses less. All sorts of good things happen—to the man as well as to the child—when the man is connected to his kids.

Susan Albright: At a very basic level, this is about something that one of the authors in your book addressed as reinvigorating social and cultural structures that provide a social order in which both freedom and opportunity can survive. How do we help younger men achieve a balance between freedom and responsibility?

David Blankenhorn: Freedom is the American ideal, but it doesn't just come from nowhere, like the air we breathe. It depends rather decisively on certain ideas and certain ways of living for men, women, children, society. The possibility of a free society depends on men being responsible partners to mothers and good fathers to their children.

The opposite of freedom is incarceration. We are building jails as fast as we can build them, and we are locking up more young men than we've ever locked up before, more than any nation has ever locked up. Which young men are we locking up? It tends to be young men from fatherless homes who can't figure out what it is to be a man. They screw up and we lock them up. Our main solution to fatherlessness is prison construction.

Without male responsibility anchored in the paternal obligation, you are not going to sustain a free society.

The stakes are very high. If you want freedom, you have to have a society in which males accept some responsibility.

Wade Horn: Freedom without self-regulation is anarchy, and fathers help children develop self-regulation. Children need a combination of a high level of love and nurturance and a moderately high degree of control. Here is a very politically incorrect statement. I'm known to be misunderstood about this, but I'll say it anyway. Study after study shows that fathers tend to exert more behavioral control over their children than do mothers. When fathers are absent, you get a high degree of love and warmth and nurturance—and lower degrees of control, and that leads to kids who feel very good about acting out.

Susan Albright: My daughter was acting up in the car, and my husband said, "If you do that once more, we are going to stop the car and walk home." We were seven miles from home. I was thinking, "Don't do it, don't do it, don't do it." He was thinking, "Go for it, kid." She did, and we walked home—and she didn't do that anymore.

David Blankenhorn: Fatherly love often does include more abstract rules than maternal love, which is more about the relationship. Forget about which is better, who is the better parent. Forget about wanting fathers to be more like mothers. Children need both.

Your daughter needs to know that she is not going to be thrown out of the car and left to find her way home by herself; she needs to know that you represent unconditional acceptance

and protection. At the same time, she needs to follow the rules.

A recent report said that more and more single-parent homes are now headed by fathers. They found some people to say that this is very progressive and we are now abandoning gender stereotypes. The idea that this is progress is a joke: the whole point is that the two parents together give the child the best chance to develop fully.

At this point, the discussion was opened to questions from the audience.

David Pence: I appreciate the language you are developing, and I think what you are doing is a good thing. But I'm with your grandmother: You make a living saying this? The reason you can is that two or three things have happened that are nuts. I want you guys to answer three questions, man to man. One: What do you think of the religious movement to demasculinize God? Two: What do you think of the general movement to not have all-male organizations? Three: How do you address the question that feminism, the women's movement, at its core asks for abortion as a fundamental right?

David Blankenhorn: I think that calling God "father" is good (I was persuaded by a very profound book by John Miller called *Biblical Faith and Fathering*), and I think all-male organizations are okay, and I'm going to punt on the abortion issue. We are trying to not draw hard lines. For two reasons, one not very important and one extremely important, we are trying not to polarize and especially trying to

avoid saying that some bad people called the feminists are responsible for all of this mess. The not very important reason is that it would alienate a lot of people who otherwise would agree with us. The important reason is that it is not true.

Susan Albright: There is nothing inconsistent in believing in the feminist goal that women should be able to make choices and recognizing that men and women offer different important things to children.

Wade Horn: And as the father of two daughters and no sons, I would not want to be part of any movement that would restrict the choices and the options that my daughters have as they grow up.

Steven Blake: I'm with Our Kids of Minnesota. I am a representative of a subgroup of fathers, divorced fathers, who are denied access to their children. My question is this: Is the current standard of visitation—every other weekend and four hours on Wednesdays—adequate for fathers to be a significant influence in their children's lives?

Wade Horn: No, of course not. One of the great tragedies of divorce is that it generally marginalizes one parent's importance and involvement in the lives of the kids. I was in New York before I came here, so it meant two nights this week I was not home with my children. I don't think that's good for my kids, so why would I think it would be good for kids for a father to be out of their lives for ten days out of every twelve?

I do believe that court systems need to be reformed, and I do think we have to find more effective ways to keep noncustodial parents involved in their children's lives, but I've got to be honest and say that I don't think there is a magic bullet called joint physical custody or joint legal custody or co-parenting. All of those could be helpful, but they don't offer a substitute for in-the-home love of a mother and a father.

I recognize that life sometimes gets in the way of ideals and people find themselves in difficult circumstances. The fatherhood movement must be broad enough to deal with the special circumstances of the divorced father, but I don't think it should give up the idea that a 50 percent divorce rate is just too high.

Rodney Johari: Within the past year, one of the major weekly news-magazines published a cover article that posed the question "Do Parents Matter?" If we assume, as implied by the title, that parents, whether they be fathers or mothers, may not matter in the lives of their children, why do we then presume a subordinate parental role for men? If, in fact, we didn't presume a subordinate role for fathers, would there be a need for a fatherhood movement?

David Blankenhorn: The book the article was referring to is called *The Nurture Assumption*, and it basically says that, in terms of outcomes for children, parents don't matter nearly as much as peer groups and other things. I don't have much respect for that book. The real question is why was this silly

book so widely discussed?

Rodney Johari: What I'm saying in effect is that if we didn't presume a subordinate role for fathers, would there be a need to call something a fatherhood movement?

David Blankenhorn: I would not say that fatherhood is "subordinate" to anything. In human societies, the father-child bond is weaker than the mother-child bond—that is just an empirical fact of life. In that sense, we need a cultural narrative that reinforces the notion of the good father. I wouldn't call fatherhood subordinate, I would just call it different from motherhood. If society stops caring what parents do, if we just become agnostic on the whole situation, mothers will basically raise the children and fathers will drift away.

V. J. Smith: I represent MAD DADS: Men Against Destruction, Defending Against Drugs. We've been on the streets for twenty weeks, trying to get guys to turn their lives around. We are having trouble finding funding. Where is the money? We need resources. We are going to stay out there because we believe that we can make a difference.

David Blankenhorn: The MAD DADS—which started in a church basement in Omaha—are showing the power of male integrity in the community.

Wade Horn: There is a paucity of funding for fatherhood programs. In the foundation world, you can count on one hand those that offer any major funding for fatherhood programs. The

federal government gives very little money. I don't know about Minnesota, but most state governments do very little. They fund family support programs, which generally means mothers and children, and they fund child support enforcement programs, but they don't fund fatherhood support, outreach, and skill-building programs.

There is hope. There is a bill in Congress called the Fathers Count Act that would provide \$2 billion over five years in block grant funding to states to help support the burgeoning fatherhood movement. I think it is a reasonable bill and something that is necessary.

The complaint from most fatherhood programs is that they have no money. They operate on passion. No one is getting rich off fatherhood programs. I hope that foundations will jump in and that someday the news will be better.

Penny Steele [a Hennepin County commissioner]: You have a great way of addressing the issue of single parenthood by advocating that fathers are important, but I don't think what you are doing is always taken as benign, is it?

Wade Horn: It's changing. Five years ago, the reaction to our messages was much more suspicious than it is today. Part of that I think is precisely because we do not have an anti-woman or anti-single mother message. We're saying that we don't have a parent to spare.

At the same time, it doesn't do us any good to ignore some additional realities. Wouldn't it be better if something less than one out of three kids were born out of wedlock? Wouldn't it be better if less than 50 percent of marriages ended in divorce? Wouldn't it be better if fewer than four out of ten children would go to sleep tonight in a home in which their father does not live? n