



It Takes a Special Person to be called “Dad”

by Deborah D. Thornton

Father’s Day was not an official holiday in the United States until 1972, when President Richard Nixon made it a permanent holiday, always the third Sunday in June.¹ However, the idea began 100 years ago this year, when Sonora Dodd of Spokane, Washington, after listening to a Mother’s Day sermon, decided her father needed honoring too. He had raised her following her mother’s death.² Being a father was not an easy job in 1909 and is not any easier today.

Research shows that not having a father in their life results in significant problems for children. Children without fathers are “two-to-three times more likely to be poor.” They are more likely to use drugs and to have education, health, emotional, and behavioral problems. In addition they are more likely to be victims of child abuse and to have criminal behavior issues.³ Unfortunately in the United States today, “half of all children and 80 percent of African American children” will spend all or part of their childhood without a father.⁴ This is caused by significant changes in the way adults live their lives, according to studies cited in “The One Hundred Billion Dollar Man,” by the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI). Today one third of children are born to single women from the beginning and many marriages end in divorce – with the same result, a child without a resident father. The most significant result of this is economic. As of 2003 over 39 percent of children with single mothers lived in poverty, compared to only 8.8 percent of two parent families.⁵ The NFI characterizes this rise as “meteoric.”⁶ In one extreme example, a man from Tennessee has created at least 20 children with at least 11 different women.⁷

Children without fathers result in major costs to society. The NFI report documented 13 federal government means-tested programs that are directly involved in providing taxpayer support to children without fathers and came up with a total cost of almost \$100 billion.⁸ The \$100 billion number is considered to be low because the NFI did not count programs that benefit communities, or benefit individuals without income considerations. They also did not count indirect costs and state-funded programs. Federal programs considered include the Earned Income Tax Credit, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Supplemental Security Income, food stamps, school lunch programs, the Women Infants and Children program, Head Start, child care, energy assistance, public housing and Section 8 housing, Medicaid, and the State Children’s Health Insurance Plan.⁹

In Iowa, the children’s health insurance program is called I-Hawk, the Iowa Healthy and Well Kids program. In the 2009 legislative session this program was expanded to cover almost all of Iowa’s children, at a cost of over \$21 million, with the federal government covering \$13 million, and the state \$7-8 million (Senate File 389).¹⁰ The state of Iowa has other family support programs, tied into the federal funding and run out of organizations as diverse as the Iowa State Extension Service. This includes access and visitation grants, which help non-custodial parents — primarily fathers — to spend time with their children. An important way absent parents may support their children is through child support payments. Unfortunately in FY2008 over \$950 million dollars of child support payments in Iowa were in arrears, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human services.¹¹ If the child support payments were made, the I-Hawk program might not need \$21 million.

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In an effort to support and encourage fathers, the non-profit National Fatherhood Initiative was started in 1994 with the idea that fathers make unique and irreplaceable contributions to their children, that their absence is negative, that society should support responsible fathering, and that “fatherlessness is the most socially consequential problem of our time.”¹² Their programs include training and support for fathers in healthcare and school issues and special training for military and corrections dads. One of their donor groups is called the “Dad’s Club,” and for a \$30.00 membership you become a “Member for Life” because “Being a Dad is a lifetime commitment.” They also have an affinity bracelet, which reads “No ifs,” symbolizing a man’s commitment that “There are ‘No ifs’ when it comes to being the best Dad you can be!”¹³

In Des Moines, the Fatherhood Initiative 12-week training program has worked with over 150 men and graduated more than 60 since 2007. The program is free and serves all fathers, from teenagers to those leaving prison to 70-year-old fathers. In addition they started working at Camp Dodge in May, helping to address the specific issues associated with being a military dad and often being away for a long period of time.¹⁴

As the song *Daddy’s Hands*, by country singer/songwriter Holly Dunn says,

“I remember daddy’s hands folded silently in prayer
And reachin’ out to hold me, when I had a nightmare...
I remember daddy’s hands how they held my mama tight
And patted my back for something done right.”¹⁵

If a child’s father is not there to pray, hold their mother, and pat their back, that child suffers. On this Father’s Day, June 21, 2009, in the midst of a national recession, growing unemployment, and difficult mortgages, we at the Public Interest Institute honor all the men who are there for their children, both in-person and financially. The responsible men who are doing the best they can in a tough world. Thank you, Dad!

Endnotes:

¹ Happy Father’s Day, <<http://www.morning-glow.com/holidays/father/father.html>> (May 14, 2009).

² Ibid.

³ Steven L. Nock and Christopher J. Einolf, “The One Hundred Billion Dollar Man,” The National Fatherhood Initiative, 2008, p. 4.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p.3.

⁶ Ibid., p.4.

⁷ “Desmond Hatchett: 29 Year Old With 21 Kids,” *Huffington Post*, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/05/27/desmond-hatchett-29-year_n_208393.html> (May 29, 2009).

⁸ Nock and Einolf, p.4.

⁹ Ibid., p.10.

¹⁰ Tony Leys and Jennifer Jacobs, “Children’s health care bill passes Iowa Senate,” *The Des Moines Register*, March 19, 2009.

¹¹ Child Support Enforcement, Health and Human Services FY 2008 Preliminary Report, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cse/pubs/2009/reports/preliminary_report_fy2008/state.html#Iowa> (May 14, 2009).

¹² The National Fatherhood Initiative, <www.fatherhood.org/history.asp> (May 14, 2009).

¹³ The National Fatherhood Initiative, <<http://www.fatherhood.org/noifs.asp>> (May 14, 2009).

¹⁴ Lisa Colonna, “Fatherhood Initiative helps men realize their value,” *The Des Moines Register*, May 5, 2009.

¹⁵ Holly Dunn, *My Daddy’s Hands*, <<http://www.metrolyrics.com/daddys-hands-lyrics-holly-dunn.html>> (May 14, 2009).

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