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tothesource asked David Blankenhorn, a nationally recognized leader in the Fatherhood Movement, to share his insights on men reconnecting with their children.



David Blankenhorn

In 1994, Blankenhorn helped to found the [National Fatherhood Initiative](#), serving as that organization's founding chairman. He also serves on the board of directors of the National Parenting Association. In 1992, he was appointed by President Bush to serve on the National Commission on America's Urban Families. A frequent lecturer, Blankenhorn's ideas have been cited in *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *Economist*, and elsewhere, and his articles have appeared in scores of publications, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, *The Public Interest*, *First Things*, and *Christianity Today*. He has been profiled by the *CBS Evening News* and other news organizations, and has been featured on numerous national television programs, including *Oprah*, *20/20*, *Eye to Eye*, *CBS This Morning*, *The Today Show*, *Charlie Rose*, *ABC Evening News*, *Equal Time*, and *C-SPAN's Washington Perspectives*.

On this Fathers Day 2004, what is the state of fatherhood in our society? First, let me state the challenge before us. A generation ago, an American child could reasonably expect to grow up with his or her father. Today, an American child can reasonably expect not to. Fatherlessness has now approached a rough parity with fatherhood as a defining feature of American childhood.

Tonight, more than one-third of American children will go to sleep in homes in which their fathers do not live. Before they reach the age of eighteen, more than half of our nation's children are likely to spend at least a significant portion of their childhood living apart from their fathers. Never before in this country have so many children been voluntarily abandoned by their fathers. Never before have so many children grown up without knowing what it means to have a father.

Fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation. It is the leading cause of declining child well-being in our society. It is also the engine driving our most urgent social problems, from crime to adolescent pregnancy to child sexual abuse to domestic violence against women.

Where is this trend heading? As people born after 1970 come increasingly to dominate our working-age adult population, the United States will be divided into two groups, separate and unequal. The two groups will work in the same economy, speak a common language, and remember the same national history. But they will live fundamentally divergent lives. One group will receive basic benefits – psychological, social, economic, educational, and moral – that are denied to the other group.

The primary fault line dividing the two groups will not be race, religion, class, education, or gender. It will be patrimony. One group will consist of those adults who grew up with the daily presence and provision of fathers. The other group will consist of those who did not. Amazingly, in our society today, these two groups are roughly the same size.

The core question is simple: Does every child need a father? Currently, our society's answer is "no", or at least, "not necessarily." Few idea shifts in this century are as consequential as this one. At stake is nothing less than what it means to be a man, who our children will be, and what kind of society we will become.

Margaret Mead and others have observed that the supreme test of any civilization is whether it can socialize men by teaching them to be fathers – creating a culture in which men acknowledge their paternity and willingly nurture their offspring. Indeed, if we equate the essence of the antisocial male with violence, we can equate the essence of the socialized male with being a good father. Thus, at the center of our most important cultural imperative, we find the story that describes what it ought to mean for a man to have a child. Today the United States is conspicuously failing to meet Margaret Mead's supreme test.

That is the challenge before us. Is there hope? Of course. Is there good news? Yes. First, some demographics. Since the late 1990s, the trends of fatherlessness and family fragmentation – as evidenced by steady increases in unwed childbearing and divorce, resulting in ever greater proportions of children living in father-absent homes – have largely stopped in their tracks.

A few key facts. The proportion of all U.S. families with children under age 18 that are headed by married couples reached an all-time low (about 73 percent) in the mid 1990s, but since then has stabilized. Similarly, the proportion of all U.S. children living in two-parent homes reached an all-time low in the mid 1990s, but since then has stabilized. Here is perhaps the most promising statistic. From 1995 to 2000, the proportion of African American children living in two-parent, married-couple homes rose from 34.8 to 38.9 percent, a significant increase in just five years, representing the clear cessation and even reversal of the long-term shift toward Black family fragmentation.

These changes are not large or definitive, but they are certainly good news. There is a lesson here. Many people have argued that the trend of fatherlessness is irreversible – a fact of modern life about which nothing can be done. These encouraging demographic developments show that these people are wrong. The trend is not irreversible. In fact, the wind may already be at our backs. If the current good trends continue and intensify, they will change the lives of millions of U.S. children and families for the better.

These new facts on the ground are in part the result of changing attitudes and values in recent years, especially among our elites. For the past decade, I've been privileged to participate in a grass-roots fatherhood movement in the United States – a diverse and growing group of leaders, initiatives, and organizations working to reconnect men with their children. In a 1997 public appeal, "A Call to Fatherhood," 55 of us wrote: "We come together because we believe that every child deserves a loving, committed, and responsible father. Not just the lucky ones, but every child. We come together from across the nation and across the political spectrum, all dedicated to ending the curse of fatherlessness that is maiming our children and coarsening our society." Much has been accomplished. Increasingly influential organizations, such as the National Fatherhood Initiative, and recent pro-fatherhood policy initiatives at both state and federal levels, as well as a significantly greater focus on fatherhood from civic, religious, philanthropic, and academic leaders, are in part the results of this fatherhood movement.

A similar grass-roots movement has arisen in recent years to support marriage. It makes perfect sense that paying more attention to fatherhood requires us also to pay more attention to marriage. Why? Because for most men, marriage is the precondition, the life support system, for hands-on, effective fatherhood. Everywhere, the two rise or fall together. In a 2000 public appeal, "The Marriage Movement," more than 100 of us wrote: "We come together to pledge that in this decade we will turn the tide on marriage and reduce divorce and unwed childbearing, so that each year more children will grow up protected by their own two happily married parents, and so that each year more adults' marriage dreams will come true."

In the area of marriage, too, much has been accomplished. Many new organizations and initiatives – including by now hundreds of church-led "community marriage policies" – have emerged. Federal welfare law now directly encourages marriage, and the Bush Administration has launched a "Healthy Marriage Initiative" aimed at supporting marriage education and marriage-supportive community organizing.

How much progress has been made? "On the heels of a fatherhood movement," writes Alex Kotlowitz in 2002 in the *New York Times*, more and more young couples in inner cities "are considering marriage." Kotlowitz's 2002 Frontline television documentary, "Let's Get Married," focuses on what the documentary calls the "burgeoning marriage movement."

New research findings, and new scholarly perspectives, are also supporting the renewed concern for fatherhood and marriage. A recent report co-sponsored by my organization is called "Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities." In the report, 33 children's doctors, brain researchers, and other child experts conclude that children are biologically primed ("hardwired") for deep connections to loving adults and to moral and spiritual meaning. And what is the first and most important of the "authoritative communities" that give children this connectedness? These researchers in lab coats tell us that it is the mother-father, married-couple family.

The great challenge on this Fathers Day is to turn these early signs of renewal into a full-fledged turnaround toward more and more U.S. children growing up in loving homes with nurturing, hands-on fathers. We now know that positive change is possible. The question before us is whether we will commit ourselves as a society to making that possibility a reality.

In their book *The Fatherhood Movement: A Call to Action*, Blankenhorn, Horn and Pearlstein lay out the challenges for social change.

The first challenge is setting goals that are compelling and realizable.

The leading indicators for evaluating progress in the fatherhood movement should include:

1. The proportion of Americans who believe that all children deserve fathers and that fatherlessness poses serious risks for children and society.
2. The proportion of children who have a positive, enduring relationship with at least one responsible adult male.
3. The proportion of children who spend their childhood living with their two, married parents
4. The proportion of children whose fathers are legally identified, support them financially, and love and nurture them to adulthood

The second challenge for the fatherhood movement is racial reconciliation.

Fatherlessness is currently increasing faster among whites than among blacks. It can no longer, then, be viewed as a black problem, a poverty problem, a "them" problem. It's an "us" problem.

The third challenge for the fatherhood movement is supporting marriage.

A marriage strategy is also the most realistic strategy. For there is little reason to believe -- there is almost no empirical evidence to suggest -- that we as a society can ignore or dispense with marriage while simultaneously renewing fatherhood. Everywhere, the two rise or fall together.

The fourth challenge for the fatherhood movement is recognizing the moral and religious dimensions of fatherhood.

Fatherhood calls men to purposes larger than themselves. In this sense, the essence of fatherhood is the giving of oneself, connecting to others, and recognizing truths that are bigger than any one man.

High Court rules that atheist father Michael Newdow lacks the legal authority to represent his 10 year old daughter in his attempt to excise the phrase "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance.

The ruling came down this week on Flag Day, exactly 50 years from the date that the phrase "under God" was added to the Pledge.

Referring to Newdow's protracted custody suit Justice Stevens said that "the interests of this parent and this child are not parallel and, indeed, are potentially in conflict." He said that while Dr. Newdow was free to "instruct his daughter in his religious views," California law did not give him "a right to dictate to others what they may and may not say to his child respecting religion." Lacking a plaintiff with standing, the federal courts did not have jurisdiction over the case.

"When hard questions of domestic relations are sure to affect the outcome, the prudent course is for the federal court to stay its hand rather than reach out to resolve a weighty issue of constitutional law," Justice John Paul Stevens wrote for the court."

Arguing for the removal of the phrase "under God" before the Supreme Court was only one of 3 lawsuits brought by Newdow this spring. The day after arguing his own case before the Supreme Court, he brought another suit attempting to stop congressional chaplains from offering prayers on Capitol Hill. In keeping with his atheist objectives, last February he attempted to abolish clergy-led prayer at presidential inaugurations.

"When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years." - Mark Twain

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