

Propositions

by David Blankenhorn

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"Dads, daughters forge key bonds"

David Blankenhorn

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Do biological fathers make unique contributions to their children? Or can stepfathers, mothers' boyfriends and other male role models serve as adequate substitutes for missing bio-dads?

Most of our grandmothers would laugh at the questions. They would tell us quite clearly that fathers matter and that fathers cannot be replaced. But many younger adults support the substitute theory of fatherhood. Pulitzer-winning playwright Wendy Wasserstein recently had a baby girl, Lucy. But Lucy's father was "not yet announced," according to *The New York Times*, because Wasserstein decided "to have the baby alone." *The Times* reports that Wasserstein has many male friends and was convinced that "no child of hers would lack for 'fathers.'"

Similarly, writing last year in the *American Psychologist*, Louise Silverstein and Carl Auerbach are "convinced" that the biological father makes no "unique and essential" contribution to his child's development. Other "responsible, caretaking" adults can do the job just as well.

Here's some research that may surprise Silverstein and Auerbach, but not our grandmothers: two studies exploring the links between the age girls reach puberty and the presence of adult males in the home.

Writing last year in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, scholars looked at factors that seem to delay the onset of girls' pubertal development: the biological father in the home, an attentive father who demonstrates warmth and love, and a close relationship between the mother and father.

The effect of absent fathers

Overall, "the quality of fathers' investment in the family emerged as the most important feature of the proximal family environment relative to daughters' pubertal timing." Regarding the data's implications, the authors stress the connection between a father's absence and some of the most serious social problems facing adolescent girls: "early

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pubertal maturation, risky sexual behavior and early age of first birth are all components of an integrated reproductive strategy that derives, in part, from low paternal investment"

Why would the father-daughter bond emerge as the key factor in the pubertal timing of daughters? The researchers speculate that it may have something to do with the daughter's exposure to her father's "pheromones."

Pheromones are chemical substances secreted by the body that serve as stimuli to others of the same species for one or more behavioral responses. Translation: Her father's

aura slows down her sexual maturation. A related hypothesis is that "low levels of positive family relationships," especially in conjunction with "exposure to unrelated adult males," serve as "causal mechanisms" for earlier puberty.

Growing up faster

Which brings us to the second study. In the March/April issue of *Child Development*, two scholars (one also was involved in the earlier study) seek to isolate the factors that seem to speed up the onset of puberty. They include maternal depression and the absence of the biological father. But an even more significant factor is the presence in the home of an "unrelated father figure" - a stepfather or mother's boyfriend. In this study, the younger the girl when the unrelated male arrived in the home, the earlier her onset of puberty.

What explains this finding? For starters, stepfathers or in-house, boyfriends are associated with greater levels of stress, dysfunction and interpersonal conflict. Also, we're back to those interesting pheromones: While a father's aura slows down a girl's sexual development, the aura of an unrelated male seems to have exactly the opposite effect.

Let's sum up: New data suggest that, if we want young girls to delay sex and childbearing, having a loving biological father at home is a good idea, while having unrelated men there is not. The wisdom we learned from our grandmothers, then largely rejected, is looking better all the time.

David Blankenhorn is president of the New York-based Institute for American Values and an editor of *The Fatherhood Movement: A Call to Action*.