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The role of the father in the young child's life and development: what do early childhood teachers need to know?

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**The Role of the Father in the Young Child's Life and Development:
What Do Early Childhood Teachers Need to Know?**

A Literature Review

By

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Abstract

The contribution of the father to the young child's life and development has been looked at far less than that of the mother. This paper analyzes how fathers impact the development of growing children and why this issue matters to early childhood educators. By extension, it analyzes the impact of a father's absence. In today's society of increasingly diverse parenting structures, many children are growing up in fatherless households. For such children, teachers may prove to be significant figures in the hierarchy of attachment. This paper begins with a brief history of attachment theory. It then provides an overview of family, teacher, child interaction within such a society and describes how the early childhood curriculum draws from the topic of the family. Next, it focuses on the nature of fatherhood by placing it in a cross-disciplinary context, with many experts attributing some of the ambiguity regarding the purpose of fatherhood to the tension between biology and culture. It also investigates the father's contributions to nurturing, discipline, and play. The paper concludes with considering different reasons for father absence, bearing in mind that not all of these configurations carry potential trauma for children. Ultimately, the paper proposes that today, while the importance of father involvement may be increasing in some ways, it may be diminishing in others, especially when medical advancements allow women to control their biological destiny now more than ever. Throughout, the paper argues that educators should deepen their knowledge of alternative family structures and promote family-school partnerships, while recognizing their significance in the hierarchy of attachments for young children. A handbook for teachers with working models and suggestions for practice appears at the end of the paper.

Keywords: fathers, fatherhood, absent fathers, attachment theory, attachment hierarchy, families and culture, families and schools

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In early childhood education, teachers and families must work together as partners. Wasow (2000) highlights the necessity of recognizing the crucial role of family and culture in the classroom while Levine and Pittinsky (1997) advise parents to think of teachers and caretakers as the “significant others” (p. 207) in their children’s lives. The phrase “significant others” is itself significant. As Levine and Pittinsky (1997) point out, “the quality of your growing child’s daily time is greatly related to the quality of the time the child spends with other people” (p. 209). These other people, especially if they are teachers, may come to fill the role of “*subsidiary figures*” (Bretherton, 2010, p. 11) in the hierarchy of attachments. According to Bretherton (2010), parents usually remain the principal or co-principal attachment figures. Attachment theory grounds this paper’s interest in relationships; that is, the relationships between families and schools, parents and teachers, children and teachers, and children and parents, with a special lens on the contributions of the father to the young child’s life and development.

The term attachment theory originated with the work of John Bowlby (1969) (Bretherton, 2010). Directly influenced by the theories of Freud and the Austrian-British child psychoanalyst Melanie Klein, the latter whom he worked with while undergoing training at the British Psychoanalytic Institute, he learned about “the object-relations approach to psychoanalysis, with its emphasis on early relationships and the pathogenic potential of loss” (Bretherton, 1992, pp. 760-761). However, whereas Klein theorized that most of children’s emotional problems come from internal conflicts and drives, Bowlby had “come to believe that actual family experiences were a much more important, if not the basic, cause of emotional disturbance” (Bretherton, 1992, p. 761). After World War II, he became head of the Children’s Department at the Tavistock Clinic, where he interviewed parents about their childhood experiences in front of their own children, and collected data on hospitalized children (Bretherton, 1992). Eventually, out of all of these experiences, he developed attachment theory,

in which he described the major styles of attachment: secure, insecure, and avoidant (Shirvanian & Michael, 2017).

In children, “Secure attachment plays an important survival function” (Shirvanian & Michael, 2017, p. 99). The securely attached child possesses advantages in confidence, social skills, and resilience (Shirvanian & Michael, 2017). Insecurely attached children, in contrast, often have poor self-esteem and less resilience (Shirvanian & Michael, 2017). A third type of attachment style, avoidant or insecure-avoidant, means that the child displays excessive independence as a result of avoiding forming intimate relationships, with insecure-ambivalent children sometimes displaying attention-seeking or negative behavior to test the strength of their bonds with grown ups (Shirvanian & Michael, 2017). Bowlby (1969) believed that insecure attachment styles resulted from children having failed to receive a consistent, warm attachment from the primary caretaker (Bretherton, 1992; Shirvanian & Michael, 2017).

Related to the concept of attachment theory is that of the secure base, meaning that “securely attached children see their mothers or other key figures as a secure base for exploring the world and learning from the environment” (Shirvanian & Michael, 2017, p. 99). Influenced by Bowlby, Mary Ainsworth (1970) studied security theory (Blatz, 1940), in which “One of the major tenets...is that infants and young children need to develop a secure dependence on parents before launching out into unfamiliar situations” (Bretherton, 1992). In a lecture she delivered called “On Security,” Ainsworth (1988) talked about studying with Blatz at the University of Toronto’s Institute of Child Study and how “I cannot remember whether Blatz used the term ‘secure base from which to explore the world’ or whether this is my own phrasing” (p. 4). Ainsworth moved to London in 1950, eventually joining Bowlby’s research unit on the formation of personality as a result of separation from the mother in early life (Bretherton, 1992). While working in this unit, Ainsworth got the idea of using methods of naturalistic observation were she to one day embark on studies of her own (Bretherton, 1992). Today, the most famous study associated with her name is the Strange Situation experiment (Ainsworth &

Wittig, 1969). In order to examine how attachment styles differ among children, Ainsworth & Wittig (1969) devised an assessment tool called the Strange Situation Classification (SSC) (Bretherton, 1992). In this procedure, as Bretherton (1992) describes it:

The Strange Situation is a 20-minute miniature drama with eight episodes. Mother and infant are introduced to a laboratory playroom, where they are later joined by an unfamiliar woman. While the stranger plays with the baby, the mother leaves briefly and then returns. A second separation ensues during which the baby is completely alone. Finally, the stranger and then the mother return. (762)

To the very young child, going to daycare or preschool is a strange situation. For this reason, attachment styles play out across the classroom organically, just as they played out more clinically in the Strange Situation (Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969). This is why Shirvanian & Michael (2017) argue that attachment-based child-care can contribute to the positive adjustment of the young child in the classroom. "The quality of child care is an important factor for a child's psychological well-being and feeling of happiness; thus it can either contribute towards the development of mental disorders or prevent them" (Shirvanian & Michael, 2017, p. 98). Similarly, Levine & Pittinsky (1997) endorse the importance of the quality of teacher-child relationships. All of this also explains why I have dealt at some length with the questions of attachment and security in my Introduction. Without a foundational understanding of the centrality of these concepts to human development, it would be hard to proceed with a paper about relationships. In this paper, I contend that teachers of young children must understand the role of the grown ups in their students' lives, in this case lasering in on the role of the father.

The majority of early attachment literature has focused on the role of the mother, with Bowlby writing in the 1950s that he primarily saw the role of the father as supporting the mother emotionally in her duties as the primary caretaker (Bretherton, 1992). Even so, Bretherton (2010) noted that his definition of the role of fatherhood in attachment expanded over time. Generally speaking, continued changes in social formation and gender relations have led to

increased recognition that men can be caretakers too. At the same time, amidst an era of softening gender expectations for men, there exists an important social phenomenon of the prevalence of fatherless children. In some sense, I have written my paper with this population of children in mind. In some sense, too, it is this population of children for whom the implications of attachment theory matter the most. Potentially, teachers can bring a good deal to these children by accepting responsibility for their important role as subsidiary or other significant figures in the child's life.

Aside from the socioemotional significance of teachers assuming the role of attachment figures, there are ultimately academic benefits to parents collaborating with teachers as well. Decades of research has supported the benefits of family school involvement on student outcomes (Casper, 2003). Evidence also confirms that parental engagement in pre-school settings results in advances in cognitive and social-emotional development (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997). Additionally, teachers' own professional knowledge and practice deepen as they learn over time to work with parents successfully (Keyes, 2000). Teachers play a role with parents, within the school, and within the partnerships that may develop between the two (Keyes, 2000). In a "partnership-focused construct" (Keyes, 2000, p. 110), both teachers and parents feel responsible for working together on behalf of the children's well-being. Keyes (2000) believes that "This view is most prevalent in early childhood programs" (p. 111), the idea being that the older children get, the more likely teachers are to believe in an effective separation between school and family. The literature supports that benefits ensue from the partnership construct in early childhood settings (Keyes, 2000).

In recent decades, children have been growing up in increasingly diverse family configurations (Blankenhorn, 1995; Casper & Schultz, 1999; Keyes, 2000; Popenoe, 2009; Wasow, 2000; Zuckerman, 2020). As a consequence, educators need to demonstrate awareness of the range of families they will encounter as well as the role of potential bias in any judgments they may make about families (Keyes, 2000). "It is therefore imperative to develop new models

of family-school involvement and to hone new skills to respond effectively to these changing and challenging demographic and power shifts” (Wasow, 2000, p. 286). The acquisition of this knowledge encourages educators to better support children from different family structures and backgrounds.

In recent decades, too, there has been a rise in single-parent households in which a father is absent (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 2009; Williams, 2019; Zuckerman, 2020). Alongside this transition, there has been an increase in same-sex parent households (Casper & Schultz, 1999). Komisar (2017) looks at the developmental impact of different caretakers, including stay-at-home fathers, on contemporary children's early lives. While in recent times some fathers have opted to become stay-at-home dads and to take a more active parenting approach than may have been widely expected in previous generations, it is simultaneously the case that many fathers are not living in the same household as their children at all. According to statistics from 2019, 15.76 million children in the U.S. were living with single mothers, with 86% of single-parent families being led by mothers and 57% of millennial mothers being single moms (Zuckerman, 2020). With so many children growing up in households in which a father or grown male fulfilling the obligations of a father figure may not be a consistent presence, it seems worthwhile to ask what this absence might mean and by implication what a father's regular engagement might provide. Still, in general, the role of the father in child development has been looked at far less than that of the mother. Sociologists (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 2009) attribute some of the ambiguity regarding the purpose of fatherhood to the tension between biology and culture. Anthropologists (Lancy, 2008; Montgomery, 2008; Williams, 2019) analyze this intersection of biology and culture in parenting styles across a global perspective. Popenoe refers to “that invisible but powerful realm called culture—the realm of values, attitudes, and beliefs. Culture, unlike biology, is a human creation—it is somewhat intentional, volitional, and subject to human intervention” (p. 196). For this reason, we cannot discuss fatherhood without also studying the influence of culture on this evolving institution.

Accordingly, then, this paper takes a cross-disciplinary approach to families and fatherhood. In the following pages, I will investigate how fathers impact the development of growing children and why this issue matters to early childhood educators. By extension, I also will investigate the impact of a father's absence. While the effects of paternal deprivation are not the sole focus of my inquiry, their implication nevertheless exerts a strong force on my question. By asking what paternal engagement provides, I consequently am asking what the lack of it may foretell. At the same time, in this project I seek to offer a more holistic, cross-disciplinary study of fatherhood in our changing society. The crossroads of society and children in the classroom animates my belief in the timely importance of this topic to teachers contending with the complexities of family life in the twenty-first century.

To this end, I begin by discussing family, teacher, and child interaction in the context of increasingly diverse family structure. The next section draws on a range of sources across disciplines, analyzing the findings of anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and psychologists in relation to the subject of the cultural and developmental purpose of fatherhood. Following that, I examine in more detail what fathers do, from their contributions in playing with to disciplining to fulfilling role models for children. These previous sections lay the foundation for the final section, in which I look at when fathers are absent and what this absence suggests for the developmental, educational, and psychological prospects of children, as well as for society at large. This section accounts for the different reasons for absence, from two-mother households to instances of divorce where the father is the non-custodial parent to the event of the father's death, acknowledging that there is a varying risk of impact of even trauma in each configuration. Finally, at the end of the paper I present a handbook with working models and suggestions for educators, translating my findings into concrete knowledge that may be applied to family, teacher, and child interactions in the classroom as needed, after concluding my thoughts and reflecting on what I have learned about this complicated topic.

Overview of Family, Teacher, Child Relationships

Family-School Partnerships

In a review of the impact of family-school engagement on children's learning and well-being, Halgunseth (2009) looked at theories of ecological and social exchange and concluded that, "The two most influential environments in which young children develop are their homes and their early childhood education programs" (p. 56). Indeed, according to Cuffaro, Nager, and Shapiro (2005) in their history of the developmental-interaction approach at Bank Street College of Education, "self and family are topics of abiding interest for children and a familiar place from which to branch out into the larger world" (p. 16). Moreover, as Cuffaro et al. (2005) point out, "Each child has a history of experiences in a world shaped and influenced by the social forces of family, community, and culture" (p. 10), and they bring these influences into the classroom with them. Within the social ecological framework, "children's development and learning occurs within a series of embedded systems, ranging from proximal (for example, home) to distal (for example, society)" (Halgunseth, 2009, p. 57). This is similar to the Ecological Systems Theory attributed to American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner (2005), in which child development is "a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surrounding environment, from immediate settings of family and school to broad cultural values, laws, and customs" (Guy-Evans, 2020, para. 1). Bronfenbrenner divided the environment into different systems, with the microsystem, containing the most immediate settings of family and school, as the most influential (Guy-Evans, 2020). "The interactions within microsystems are often very personal and are crucial for fostering and supporting the child's development" (Guy-Evans, 2020, para. 18). Indeed, so important did Bronfenbrenner find the interaction of these different systems, he "argued that studies of children in unfamiliar laboratory environments with one other person, usually a stranger, were ecologically invalid" (Guy-Evans, 2020, para. 6).

As a result of the interdependency of these overlapping systems, parents and teachers frequently find themselves navigating intimate territory together. Attesting to the nature of this

intimacy, in their research about how working fathers can balance parenting and professional demands, Levine and Pittinsky (1997) write, "Nowhere is the power of your connection with the other important adults in your child's life more clear and compelling than in your child's education" (p. 209). The authors argue that parents can make a difference in their children's lives by building alliances with teachers, especially since some children may spend so many of their waking hours away from home and in these alternate caretaking settings (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997). Just as parents seek to spend "quality time" (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997, p. 209) with their offspring, so too do these settings represent an opportunity for the child to spend quality time with other invested grown ups, contributing to the enrichment of their development. Levine and Pittinsky (1997) also found that events that draw parents physically into the school, such as "attending school programs, extracurricular activities, teacher conferences, and 'back to school' nights" (p. 210), have the most impact. "When this sort of involvement occurs regularly, it reinforces the view in the child's mind that school and home are connected and that school is an integral part of the whole family's life" (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997, p. 210). In her essay about families and schools, Wasow (2000) advocates viewing parent-teacher relationships through a systems approach, which "sees the child moving between at least two powerful worlds: the world of home and the world of school" (p. 276). According to Casper and Schultz (1999), the authors of a book about communication between gay parents and elementary schools, "Of necessity, school and home are cut from different cloth, yet there must be common threads connecting them for children and family to grow and flourish" (p. 2). Additionally, Caspe (2003) analyzed 13 in-depth interviews with teachers in a rural New England community about their experiences with home-school partnerships and observed that, "Teachers [learn] about the family when children [speak] or [write] about issues such as their siblings, homework helpers, parents' fighting, family pets, and out-of-school time experiences" (p. 122). All of these examples of the ways in which school and families overlap in the classroom suggest the potential for strengthening this intimacy.

Further, as noted by Cuffaro et al. (2005), an early childhood curriculum using the developmental-interaction approach may draw on the child's home and family life. Consistently associated with Bank Street, this approach "calls immediate attention to the centrality of the concept of development, the ways in which children's...modes of apprehending, understanding, and responding to the world change and grow as a consequence of their continuing experience of living" (Cuffaro et al., 2005, p. 1). This approach also stresses that thinking and emotion are connected across the course of development, and that teachers can best support this development by emphasizing "the importance of engagement with the environment of people and the material world" (Cuffaro et al., 2005, p., 1). Consequently, teachers trained in the developmental-interaction approach consider the child in relation to the environment. As Cuffaro et al. (2005) explain in their discussion of social studies curriculums, "Social studies is about the relationships between and among people and their environment, the world in which we live and our place in it" (p. 11). Whereas social studies curriculums for older children may branch out to thinking about their surrounding neighborhoods and communities and ultimately history and geography, in early childhood the focus remains on the self and the family (Cuffaro et al., 2005). This means that assignments and activities may bring these worlds directly in contact with the other, as in the case of the nuances of Father's Day celebrations, as explored by Laureta (2018), who looked at evidence-based techniques for including children from diverse family structures in such activities:

Should these traditions be celebrated at all, knowing that having such activities will exclude some children and their families? There is a compelling reason not to. If we choose to celebrate Father's Day, it may greatly affect the sense of belonging of children and families where a father plays a minor role or is absent or does not exist. We may assume that the parents or families of children without a father figure may not desire to take part in such activities. On the other hand, when children experience celebrations that are embedded in cultural traditions,

these add to their funds of knowledge and cultural tools, which they use to make sense of their world. (3)

In this sense, the argument of Laureta (2018) echoes that of Cuffaro et al. (2005), who encourages viewing the child as “an active maker of meaning” (p. 7). As a discipline, social studies provides particularly fertile ground for making meaning out of these “funds of knowledge and cultural tools” (Laureta, 2018, p. 3). Keyes (2000) quotes a teacher who remarked that culture means more than just holidays and food; it also means communication. In this vein, sensitive teachers should make an effort to create an atmosphere of belonging for children from diverse family structures. Recommended strategies for doing so include guiding children to feel secure attachments to their teachers; facilitating relationships and a spirit of open communication with families; and introducing materials and depictions about diverse family structures in early childhood settings (Laureta, 2018). In preparation for something like a Father's Day celebration, Laureta (2018) advises that “policies should explicitly state that all families are welcome and celebrated. For example, a welcome letter that describes the diverse ways that families are composed and that everyone is part of the...community” (p. 4). Also, “Resources should enable children to make their own choices in selecting groupings that have meaning for them when they construct family for play” (Laureta, 2018, p. 4).

Overall, these recommendations suggest that if teachers take care beforehand to create a secure and accepting environment regarding family structure, children should feel included, rather than excluded, from participating in a Father's Day celebration, whoever the father figures in their lives may be.

If thoughtful educators effectively implement such practices, the benefits for children may be rich indeed. After all, “The school empowers children to deal effectively with their environments. It is an active community, connected to the social world of which it is a part, rather than an isolated place for learning lessons” (Cuffaro et al., 2005, p. 9). Thus, a reflective

approach to something like a Father's Day celebration may indirectly result in the beginnings of self-empowerment even for very young children.

It is important to remember that, from a historic perspective, many teachers used to belong to the same community where they both lived and taught (Keyes, 2000; Wasow, 2000). In such an arrangement, the teacher's lessons likely reflected knowledge of the community and its shared values. Then, "This seamless boundary between family and school changed dramatically with the increasing professionalization of teaching and with the changing face of cities" (Wasow, 2000, p. 278). As a result, evidence indicates that in more recent times teachers may harbor biases about families with whose communities and cultures they may not be as familiar (Casper, 2003). Bias is a common human issue that affects teachers around the issue of dealing with families and one that McDevitt and Ormrod (2008) addressed in their article about changing conceptual thinking in prospective teachers around issues of childhood development. They caution about the danger of "*ethnocentric bias*, a tendency to take one's own cultural teachings as general standards of what practices are "right" or "best" (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2008, p. 87). While caretaking practices differ dramatically across cultures, without the hard work of knowledge and self-reflection teachers still may believe that the practices of their own culture are the correct or the only ones (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2008). "Almost invariably," McDevitt & Ormrod (2008) write, "people learn more effectively when they engage in *meaningful learning*, that is, when they make conscious connections between new information and the things they already know and believe" (p. 88). This endorsement of making meaning out of knowledge again evokes the work of Cuffarol et al. (2005), with its emphasis on meaning-making for both teachers and their students as an integral part of the developmental-interaction approach.

With the objective of confronting bias, "schools should help to create more equitable relationships than those that exist in the larger society" (Casper & Schultz, 1999, p. xiii). To this end, Caspe (2003) stresses that "The development of relationships depends on an individual's

capacity to understand the other person” (p. 116). Analyzing the research on parent-teacher partnerships, Keyes (2000) states, “If there is a consistent match between teacher and family cultures and values, the probabilities are greater for developing effective professional skills in working with parents over time” (pp. 108-109). The mastery of reaching empathic understanding between families and teachers is the ultimate goal in optimizing the child’s development in the classroom and beyond.

Educators agree that all families are engaged in the pursuit of their children’s education to some extent. “It seems safe to assume that all families want the best for their children,” write Cuffaro et al. (2005), “but it does not necessarily follow that we know what a particular family considers best” (p. 16). In order to find out, teachers are advised to ask themselves how well they are collaborating with the parents of the children in their classrooms (Halgunseth, 2009). In the beginning, collaborating might simply look like conversation; “A democratic community invites rather than silences questioning and discussion” (Cuffaro et al., 2005). Consequently, change is more likely when the teaching atmosphere of the classroom appears to allow for it (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2008). “Beyond the hospital nursery or the adoption agency, school is the first significant institution parents have a large stake in successfully negotiating” (Casper & Schultz, 1999, p. 2). To make parents feel understood as they navigate this environment, it is not necessarily enough just to do outreach, either; teachers should make meaning from their findings (Casper, 2003). They also must pay attention to the influence of culture (Keyes, 2000; Laureta, 2018; Wasow, 2000). Moreover, Halgunseth (2009) highlights the role of trust in social exchange theory, in which the development of social relationships relies on the exchange of resources with both tangible and intangible benefits. For instance, offering parents adult education classes or workshops is a tangible benefit; providing their children with a supportive environment is intangible (Halgunseth, 2009). Within such exchanges, “families can offer educators knowledge about their children or help reinforce at home key concepts taught in the program” (Halgunseth, 2009, p. 57). This underlines the point that Caspe (2003) makes about

relationships being dependent on understanding, and is in keeping with Keyes' (2000) discussion of the goodness of fit between teachers and families.

Psychiatrists Thomas and Chess (1970) conducted longitudinal studies to examine the related concepts of goodness of fit and temperament and identified nine traits of personality that contribute to the quality of relationships between children and their parents (Keogh, 2009). While Thomas and Chess focused on the role of temperament in parent-child interactions, Keogh (2009) notes that teachers also bring their own temperaments to the classroom. "Classrooms differ in the pace of instruction, in the nature of personal interactions, and in the emotional tone in the room" (Keogh, 2009, para. 26) Bearing this in mind, teachers should pay attention to how their own temperament may influence not only relationships with students but with their parents. "The degree of success that teachers have in developing a partnership with parents depends heavily on the 'fit' between parental cares and concerns and those of the teacher" (Keyes, 2000, p. 108). For their part, parents should consider how understanding temperament helps their child's transition to school (Keogh, 2009). Both of these points apply in particular to building parent-teacher partnerships in early childhood settings. For one thing, there is such a prevalence of family involvement in the early childhood classroom (i.e., curriculum and homework that may draw on family stories and content or bringing in at home objects for show-and-tell) . For another, the younger they are, the more children still experience the process of separation from primary to secondary caretakers (Shirvanian & Michael, 2017). Some of the techniques used by educators to facilitate separation may include "separation and reunion rituals... open-door policy for parents to help them participate in children's daily activities... daily reports about children's eating, sleeping, and other activities [and] using transitional objects to help children feel familiar surroundings" (Shirvanian & Michael, 2017, p. 107). As Keogh (2009) points out, "For some children the move from home to school is easy, and they flourish. For others the transition is not simple, and they have a difficult time adjusting" (para. 28). The more that parents and teachers can work together to recognize the importance

that temperament plays in this transition (Keogh, 2009), the more likely harmony or a goodness of fit will be achieved by all involved.

Eventually, with consideration of trust, temperament, and goodness of fit, strong school-family partnerships benefit children (Halgunseth, 2009). How parents perceive outreach from teachers has been shown to predict rates of family involvement in schools (Caspé, 2003). Indeed, studies have shown that one of the most serious effects on declining academic performances by American students is parent disengagement (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997). Studies also have cited gains in socio-emotional development from family involvement (Caspé, 2003). In general, “Being plugged into your child’s school experience—from preschool through high school and even beyond—has big benefits” (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997, p. 212). After all, “The common interest is the schooling of a child” (Keyes, 2000, p. 108). The commonality of this interest explains why school-family involvement matters to teachers, parents, and above all to growing children.

Increasingly Diverse Parenting Structure and Family Configurations

Optimal understanding between families and teachers likely has become ever more complex and elusive in our rapidly changing society. If it is crucial to look at the influence of culture in the classroom (Cuffaro et al., 2005; Keyes, 2000; Laureta, 2018; McDevitt & Ormrod, 2008; Wasow, 2000), it is equally crucial that educators seek to understand the contributing factors of the culture at large. In particular, one such contributing factor is that of family structure. “In addition to what was at one time the traditional two-parent family, we now have two-parent working families, single-parent families, adoptive families, and remarried or blended families...Family roles have also become more flexible and fluid” (Keyes, 2000, p. 109). Komisar (2017) looks at this flexibility by discussing the effects of different caretakers, including stay-at-home fathers. Casper & Schultz (1999) reflect on the experience of gay and lesbian families in schools, a family configuration that in the twenty first- century has only become more common, with over 190,000 children in America living with two same-sex parents as of the year

2019 (Gurrentz & Valerio, 2019). In addition, many adults are getting married and having children later, as well as residing in different kinds of living arrangements (Gurrentz & Valerio, 2019). “Among adults ages 18 and over, 18.5 million (7%) are now cohabiting, up from 14.2 million (6%) in 2009” (Gurrentz & Valerio, 2019, para. 20). Communal living is still another parenting option (Casper & Schultz, 1999). Laureta (2018) asserts that “There are many ways of being a family...Regardless of family type, children have the right to live in a society where they and their families are accepted for who they are” (p. 3). Accordingly then, it is the duty of educators to deeply understand the family configurations of said society, not to mention the particular family configurations of children within their classroom.

The family configuration with which this paper is concerned is that of the fatherless household. Granted, this does not necessarily mean that the children coming of age in such households are without grown males who may well fall under the broad category of what are known as father figures. Still, in recent decades, “life without father’ has become a reality for a growing number of American children” (Popenoe, 2009, p. vii). Statistics bear this out, with 86% of single-parent families in the US being led by mothers (Zuckerman, 2020). As of the year 2017, 21% of children under 18 years were living with single mothers, with just 4% living with single fathers (Zuckerman, 2020). If we consider that 57% of millennial mothers are single mothers (Zuckerman, 2020), it indicates that teachers are likely to engage with many children growing up in such households over the course of their careers.

Furthermore, “Over a quarter (26%) of children under the age of 15 who live in married-couple families have a stay-at-home mother, compared to only 1% with a stay-at-home father” (Gurrentz & Valerio, 2019, para. 26). This statistic suggests that even in two-family households, mothers may still be doing the majority of the caretaking. At the same time, we should recall that family roles are becoming more flexible (Keyes, 2000). While sociologists are concerned about the diminishment of American fatherhood (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 2009), it is worth bearing in mind in any even-handed discussion of fatherhood that many

contemporary fathers are seeking a more active parenting role (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997). Thus, in this perpetually transforming society, teachers may encounter both students with actively engaged fathers or without fathers in the home at all, as well as interacting with same-sex families (Casper & Schultz, 1999). Since “teachers are key to family involvement” (Casper, 2003, p. 126), they are also key to creating a climate of cultural literacy based on knowledge of this complicated contemporary culture, the children who are growing up in households without fathers being citizens of said culture, worthy of due sensitivity and consideration with regard to their developmental well-being. In the words of Laureta (2018), “Intentional teachers...use reflective practice to learn about themselves and work through their bias to build their capacity to be inclusive” (p. 4). In their work on bias, McDevitt & Ormrod (2008) share this viewpoint by writing that “Expert instructors—those whose classroom practices consistently yield positive outcomes in students—typically engage in *reflective teaching*” (p. 88). Ideally, this combination of cultural literacy and intentionality should serve teachers and such children in their classrooms well. Above all, “Sharing responsibility [for children] means sharing power and actively seeking engagement” (Cuffaro et al., 2005).

Fatherhood in a Cross-Disciplinary Context

Anthropological

“From the late 19th century onward,” writes Montgomery (2008), “research on children has moved steadily from the margins to the center of academic interest and it now makes sense to talk of a distinctive field of childhood studies which has been characterized by its interdisciplinarity” (p. 1). Among these disciplines is anthropology, which provides a wide lens through which to learn about the care of children across cultures. Until relatively recently, however, most academics believed that the study of fatherhood was underrepresented in the anthropological record (Barone, 2019). While much of anthropology has looked at men and masculinity in general, it appears as if scholars in the field have written less about men’s contributions to childrearing (Barone, 2019). In a post that draws from global ethnographic

examples in world cultures, Barone (2019) suggests that this comparative scarcity of information about the anthropology of fatherhood may be due to the confusion regarding whether being a father is a biological or a social role. Sociologists (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 2009) have struggled with a similar tension in their works about fatherhood. Williams (2019) poses a series of questions that animate his book about fathers and their offspring in the first three years of life:

How ancient is father care of human infants and young children, and why did it emerge? Is it possible that father care arose among the ancestors of modern humans and became essential for survival? Or is a recent, though variable, development? Is father care an evolved trait of *Homo sapiens*, or is it a learned cultural behavior transmitted across generations in some societies but not others? (p. 1)

The important word here is “variable.” Lancy (2008), the author of an authoritative book about the anthropology of childhood around the world, states that “Building on a firm foundation of research in history, anthropology, and primatology, I hope to uncover something close to the norm for children’s lives and those of their caretakers” (p. 3). This indicates that in human societies there may indeed be something “close to a norm,” yet at the same time a good deal of cultural variation may exist within it. A motivating force of Lancy’s (2008) in pursuing this project was to “offer a correction to the ethnocentric lens” (p. 2) of many western stereotypes about best childcare practices. Montgomery (2008), who wrote another anthropological chronicle of childhood, asserts the necessity of cultural relativism to anthropologists. Since students of education and teachers’ “tacit beliefs about children may be especially resistant to conceptual change” (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2008, p. 86), exposure to thinkers who confront ethnocentric bias in their work possesses great benefit for those building relationships with children and families. After all, contends Montgomery (2008), “Anthropologists who have looked at childhood have consistently shown that there is no one

universal form of nurturing or correct path to adulthood and that nurturance is as dependent on cultural and environmental considerations as it is on biological ones" (p. 106).

As a field, anthropology concerns itself with ties of kinship and family (Lancy, 2008; Montgomery, 2008; Williams, 2019). Much anthropological fieldwork from around the world has shown that after a baby is born, complex webs of women—grandmothers, aunts, sisters, as well as female in-laws and the baby's elder female siblings—may assist the mother in housework and childcare (Lancy, 2008; Montgomery, 2008). Polygamous family structures with an emphasis on communal female caregiving still exist in many parts of the world (Lancy, 2008; Montgomery, 2008). Where fathers fit in within this hierarchy of attachments does seem to be more irregular; adding to this ambivalence, in some tribes women may have up to two husbands and both may enjoy claim to their offspring (Barone, 2019). In the Canela, which is an Amerindian group living in Brazil, people believe that after a woman is pregnant, any more sperm received by other men makes a biological contribution to the fetus (Montgomery, 2008). The responsibilities of the father are divided by more than one person within such configurations (Montgomery, 2008). In some tribes, biological paternity is of less pressing concern, whereas many others exclusively recognize biological parentage (Barone, 2019). Across the world, patterns with regard to this difference between social and biological paternity vary (Lancy, 2008). Social scientists use the terms *mater* and *pater* to refer to the social parents and *genitor* and *genetrix* to refer to the biological ones (Montgomery, 2008). Ultimately, "The first task of parenting, the begetting of children...is far from straightforward" (Montgomery, 2008, p. 105). This absence of straightforwardness challenges other kinds of norms regarding family structure.

Still, fatherhood appears to be significant when it comes to establishing the child's position in society (Lancy, 2008; Montgomery, 2008). These benefits are reciprocal; "while one of the roles of parenthood is to confer civil and kinship status on children, one of the roles of children is to confer the same on adults" (Montgomery, 2008, p. 106). To this end, Williams

(2019) describes in great detail the birth ritual known as *couvade*, “to help cement the societal role of fathers and their commitment to the neonate” (p. 44). Meanwhile, if a child is born out of wedlock in a society that discourages unmarried women having children, this child is less likely to enjoy a high social status than a child with two parents (Montgomery, 2008). In their sociological texts, Blankenhorn (1995) and Popenoe (2009) make the same argument about children growing up in the west. Overall, anthropologists suggest that if establishing paternity endows children with advantages, it does the same to fathers within the social sphere by indicating that they are ready to fulfill the role of provider (Lancy, 2008; Montgomery, 2008). Williams (2019) uses the term “provisioning” (p. 7). Barone (2019) writes:

Exchange—including bridewealth or inheritance—is central in ethnographic accounts of paternity. Although it may seem cold and calculating to Western onlookers, it is not much different than the expectation that a father be made to support his wife (or partner) and offspring financially— something that the laws of modern nation-states often take more interest in than emotional support— and shows that there is a near-universal expectation for dads to be ‘providers.’ (para. 16)

At the same time, anthropologists who have looked at fatherhood have demonstrated interest in the emotional components of the relationship between father and child (Williams, 2019). Cultural examples complicate the “unfair, largely anglo-American assumption [that] all dads stereotypically distanced disciplinarians and all mothers loving, caring nurturers” (Barone, 2019, para. 17). As a rebuke to the latter assumption, Lancy (2008) shows instances of mothers as harsh disciplinarians or even what western readers might characterize as abusers, with the caveat that conceptions of child abuse also may be subject to cultural relativism. Moreover, in his work Williams (2019) asserts that father-child bonding shapes the social and biological development of infants, proposing that “there are hormonal, physiological, psychological, and social changes that occur when males are culturally recognized as fathers” (p. 5) and that these changes may exert a strong, mutual force on forming secure attachments between fathers and

their children. In continental Europe, after the birth, the father would retreat to what was known as the “‘man childbed,’ wherein recent fathers would ‘lie-in’ for varying lengths of time to contemplate the responsibility of a recognized father-infant relationship” (Williams, 2019, p. 44). This may be seen as a variation on the co-sleeping arrangements still popular in many cultures around the world (Lancy, 2008; Williams, 2019). When their children become slightly older, caretaking fathers exhibit behaviors like carrying babies and toddlers, sharing food, and providing protection from predators (Williams, 2019). All of this father-child contact results in an increase in social learning and relations beyond the immediate domestic and maternal sphere; “it is the social factors that tend to promote the survival and enhance the quality of infants’ lives in a socially complex and environmentally unpredictable world” (Williams, 2019, p. 119).

Simultaneously, anthropological records imply that in some societies fathers really are less than involved (Lancy, 2008). Even Williams (2019) concedes that the “global presence of father care is highly fragmented” (p. 14). Barone (2019) thinks that cultural stereotypes may have encouraged researchers to dismiss the role of fathers in their ethnographic explorations. In some of these societies, once the toddler learns to walk and has no need of being carried anymore, the father’s direct caregiving may cease to be needed at all and extended female kin will step in to raise the child along with the mother instead (Lancy, 2008). “The child is cosseted in a blanket of humanity, an idea captured by the African proverb ‘It takes a village’” (Lancy, 2008, p. 17). Furthermore, in such societies, even the mother’s significance may be much diminished compared to what societies expect of mothers in the west (Lancy, 2008). This last point adds considerable complexity to the discussion of attachment theory, as attributed to Bowlby (1969), with its emphasis on the ideal of the child flourishing within a secure relationship to a primary caregiver (Montgomery, 2008). Anthropology, writes Montgomery (2008), “has also been used to challenge the universalist tendencies of developmental psychology, which has insisted on, for example, optimal forms of attachment between infant and

mother (or maternal caregiver), regardless of cultural background” (p. 31). Yet cultural background is always of the utmost importance to anthropologists, as it optimally is to educators working with families of diverse arrangements (Cuffaro et al., 2005; Keyes, 2000; Laureta, 2018; McDevitt & Ormrod, 2008; Wasow, 2000). Educators in the classroom, much like anthropologists in the field, are advised to resist making judgements that come from a place of “*confirmation bias*” (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2008, p. 87). Additionally, if “Each child has a history of experiences in a world shaped and influenced by the social forces of family, community, and culture” (Cuffaro et al., 2005, p. 10), then anthropology with its deep investigation into all three has much to impart to people who work with children.

Historical-Sociological

“Fragmentation of fatherhood,” argues Blankenhorn (1995) in his book *Fatherless America*, “represents the end point of a long historical process: the steady diminishment of fatherhood as a social role for men” (p. 12). In his book *Families Without Fathers*, Popenoe (2009) makes a similar case, writing that “The father’s role has shrunk drastically over the years. American fathers have been losing authority within the family and psychologically withdrawing from a direct role in childbearing almost since colonial times” (p. 6). While it is certainly worth noting that the work of philosophical thinkers like Ruddick (1995) and Doucet (2018), as well as that of Levine and Pittinsky (1997) with their advocacy on behalf of working fathers spending quality time with their families, demonstrates a more flexible approach to thinking about the father’s obligations, in general, sociologists have tended to take a more conservative tack. The contributions to the field of fatherhood studies by Blankenhorn (1995) and Popenoe (2009) are also more ethnocentric, being concerned with the historic arc of the nuclear family in northwestern Europe and America. In spite of this caveat, they are still valuable sources for placing fatherhood in a wider historical-sociological context. Of family structure in northwestern Europe, Popenoe (2009) reflects:

Why this part of the world was unique and when it was that these societies broke away from the rest of the world to lead the trend toward the nuclear family are questions that have commanded a great deal of scholarly attention but remain largely unresolved. There are some indications, indeed, that the peasant family steeped in extended kinship-ties may *never* have existed in northwestern Europe as it did in most other parts of the world during the preindustrial era and as it still does in most of the Third World today. The family 'exceptionalism' of northwest Europe is typically attributed to unique cultural and geographic factors. (83-84)

In many of its defining characteristics, the preindustrial family foreshadowed the nuclear family that the popular imagination associates with America for much of the twentieth century (Popenoe, 2009). These characteristics included the household consisting of a married couple and their children with no or very few other cohabiting relatives and the husband and wife usually being relatively close in age (Popenoe, 2009). Moreover, from an economic perspective, "Everyone was involved in agriculture and its sale for the family's subsistence. People were not mobile" (Linn, Wilson, and Fako, 2015, p. 12). Above all, such households were patriarchal, with the father being clearly defined as the head of the family (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 2009). "The father, as designated head of the premodern European family and household, was a powerful figure. Father power rested on the ownership of land, the primary basis of production, and was fully enshrined in law" (Popenoe, 2009, p. 85). In her description of paternal power, Ruddick (1995) stresses the economic and legal aspects of fatherhood as well, declaring that fathers symbolize "the 'world'" (p. 42). Unlike Blankenhorn (1995) and Popenoe (2009), whose work suggests an elegy for the diminishment of the patriarchal role, Ruddick (1995) contends that this "myth of fatherhood may be cruel to women and men" (p. 43). By most modern standards, the marriage bonds in such households were "more functional than romantic" (Popenoe, 2009, p. 86), with higher status given to the father than the husband role. Moreover, supporting Ruddick's (1995) argument, society expected that wives be "submissive and

obedient” (Popenoe, 2009, pp. 87-88) at all times. In addition to this, the law forbade them from owning property, voting, or attending school (Linn et al., 2015).

In colonial America, meanwhile, “fathers were seen as primary and irreplaceable caregivers. According to both law and custom, fathers bore the ultimate responsibility for the care and well-being of their children” (Blankenhorn, 1995, p. 13). This represents a departure from the more recent trope in which society regards *mothers*, more than *fathers*, as being responsible for their children’s well-being and judges them in the event that something goes wrong (Phares, 1999). Indeed, as Phares (1999) points out, “Although there is now more awareness about the harm of blaming mothers for their children’s problems, a great deal of mother blaming (and father ignoring) continues to occur in psychological research and therapy” (p. 32). Ruddick (1995) also writes about the exalted maternal standards to which people hold mothers. Yet throughout colonial times as well as into the beginning of the eighteenth century, experts addressed their child-rearing advice to fathers instead of mothers, and in divorce, courts almost always granted custody to fathers (Blankenhorn, 1995). “As a result, societal praise or blame for a child’s outcome was customarily bestowed not (as it is today) on the mother but on the father” (Blankenhorn, 1995, p. 13). At the same time, in puritan communities people considered it acceptable to interfere in the life of another family should it struggle to meet its duties (Popenoe, 2009). This suggests a loose variation on the “It takes a village” idea usually more frequently observed in other cultures (Lancy, 2008), with fluid boundaries between family and community, private life and public life (Popenoe, 2009). Additionally, people living within such communities “depended on local networks of kin and friends for their livelihood” (Linn et al., 2015, p. 13). Still, ultimate responsibility for one’s family rested with the father (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 2009).

The Industrial Revolution in the mid eighteenth to nineteenth century resulted in the division between home and work, with husbands venturing out in the world to earn income and wives staying home (Blankenhorn, 1995; Linn et al., 2015; Popenoe, 2009). As a result,

“Families had to be mobile and migrate to where jobs were located” (Linn et al., 2015, p. 13). This also meant that children no longer acquired skills by watching their fathers working and ultimately working alongside them as they grew older (Blankenhorn, 1995). Consequently, Blankenhorn (1995) observes:

The major change in family life in the nineteenth century was the feminization of the domestic sphere. Accompanying this radical change were a host of new ideas about gender identity and family life—some focusing on childhood as a special and separate ‘tender years’ stage of life, others on what were believed to be the special capacities of women to care for children and to create, in contrast to the outside world dominated by men, a secure moral ethos for family life. (13)

This development led to the fragmentation of the role of the father in family life (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 2009). It also helped to redefine marriage “from an institutionally prescribed and sanctioned bond...to a companionate relationship between fathers and mothers” (Linn et al., 2015, p. 13). Furthermore, the presumptive link between mothers and their innate abilities to care for children (Blankenhorn, 1995) contributed to the extraordinary moral and societal burden that is placed on mothers even today, as highlighted in the writings of Doucet (2018), Komisar (2017), Phares (1999), and Ruddick (1995). While Komisar (2017), coming from the vantage point of a psychoanalyst, asserts that there is something uniquely integral about maternal love and presence in the early years of a child's life, Ruddick (1995), as philosopher, disputes these assumptions by writing, “This conception of mothering as a kind of caring labor undermines the myth that mothers are ‘naturally’ loving...Nor is there a single emotion—love—that children inspire in mothers” (Ruddick, 1995, p. xi). Doucet (2018) speaks of “the gendered costs of care” (p. 6), meaning that mothers still typically accrue them more than fathers. Meanwhile, Phares (1999) raises the question of why fathers are often ignored, compared to mothers, in developmental psychology literature. The investigations of Blankenhorn (1995) and Popenoe (2009) into the history of fatherhood suggest a possible

explanation: the erasure of the role of the father as society and marriage itself evolved in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, where for many decades the nuclear model with the father generating income outside of the home and the mother presiding over the children remained the traditional model for the formation of the family.

That is, this formation remained prevalent until changes swept through society again in the 1960s and 70s, as a consequence of the sexual revolution and the ensuing women's movement (Blankenhorn, 1995; Linn et al., 2015; Popenoe, 2009). Whereas previously "Marital contentment in the United States and Europe involved companionship, love, and the successful completion of culturally and gender defined family roles" (Linn et al., 2015, p. 13), after these social upheavals the divorce rate and instances of father abandonment skyrocketed (Blankenhorn, 1995). Around 1980, divorce rates peaked (Linn et al., 2015). Sociologists attribute some of these developments to the flourishing of individualism, which is famously celebrated in the national character (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 2009). According to Blankenhorn (1995), "The fatherless family of the United States in the late twentieth century is a social invention of the most daring and untested design. It represents a radical departure from virtually all of human history and experience" (p. 48). It is necessary to add that this sweeping assertion may be somewhat ethnocentric, as well as contradictory to some of the examples of alternate family formation that anthropologists (Lancy, 2008; Montgomery, 2008) have found in the existing fieldwork. Looking back at history, Popenoe (2009) concedes that "the gradual rise of individualism and enlightened political and economic ideas that took place during the eighteenth century brought the autonomous citizen—mainly, of course, the white male citizen—to the fore as constituent unit of society and ultimate source of cultural value" (p. 90). Against this backdrop, "the climate was set for the great family transformation—and the quiet decline of the man as head of family and primary parent" (Popenoe, 2009, p. 91). Here, Linn et al. (2015) describe the eventual changes in the lives of women that accompanied those in the lives of men:

Beginning in the 1960s, a new role model was emerging for women in many highly industrialized Western European Countries and the United States. Feminists made a convincing argument that females should seek higher education, become employed in the workforce, and manage their own money. Fathers, for the first time in Western history, were expected to participate equally in household and childrearing roles with their wives...Together with this monumental change in sex roles was a change in women's and men's views of marriage. There was a shift from companionate to individualized marriage. (13-14)

For both partners, an individualized marriage promised greater flexibility (Linn et al., 2015). More recently, in an example of this flexibility, many fathers take a more direct role in caretaking than they may have done in previous generations (Doucet, 2018; Komisar, 2017; Levine & Pittinsky, 1997; Ruddick, 1995). In the view of Ruddick (1995), "men are increasingly engaged in mothering" (p. xii). As part of her work, Ruddick (1995) declares that "I want to protest the myth and practice of Fatherhood and at the same time underline the importance of men undertaking maternal work" (p. 44). Similarly, Doucet (2018) studies the caretaking of men as an honorable human practice. Levine and Pittinsky (1997) advise fathers on balancing work and family, this being yet another important kind of flexibility and one that still matters two decades later as families inhabit a society that does indeed appear to be increasingly fragmented and diverse. "In North America and much of Europe," argues Doucet (2018), "men's declining wages, increasing male employment, sustained growth in women's labour force participation, and changing ideologies associated with men and women's roles and identities as parents and as workers have all increased the emphasis on understanding the changing social institutions of mothering and fathering" (p. 8). With awareness of these many complex factors in mind, it is good practice for educators who seek to understand the families in their classroom to learn about the society they live in, as well as something about the ones that came before. In the case of thinking about fatherhood, this may be especially true, given that it is not just a natural but a

cultural role (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 2009) and therefore may be dependent for its cues on the culture that families are existing in at any given time in human history. As the school, family, and culture interact in the classroom and as most of them have become more and more multicultural ever since the 1960s and 70s (Wasow, 2000), it is also good practice to recall that culture is not made up of one group at any time but of the many different groups living within that culture. Acknowledging that there can be “tension between development, cultural values, and educational goals” (Wasow, 2000, p. 282) represents a necessary step in the educator educating themselves about not only the society they live in but the society that came before.

Psychological. “Today,” writes Komisar (2017), “when fathers are more involved in raising their children than ever before, the idea of the unique and irreplaceable role of a mother may seem old-fashioned” (p. 37). Yet historically, developmental psychology prioritizes the role of the mother over that of the father (Phares, 1999). Phares (1999) points out that the idea of maternal instinct as something that is natural and integral to mothers has led to some psychologists placing a heavier burden on them, even though “a number of...studies have discredited the existence of maternal instinct, and yet many people continue to believe in this myth” (p. 32). When Phares (1999) refers to people, she most likely means that many of us, aside from psychologists, have internalized this cultural script about motherhood. Furthermore, western cultures sometimes have demonstrated a tendency to see mothers as being all good or all bad (Phares, 1999). The formulation of the phrase “good enough mother” from British pediatrician Donald Winnicott (1960) provides a reassuring contrast to these ideas (Komisar, 2017). For Winnicott (1960), this phrase means that a mother is available enough of the time and tries to soothe the baby upon her return as much as possible, allowing the child to hold onto the soothing image of the mother in the event she is away without having to panic (Komisar, 2017). Komisar (2017) expands the definition of the “good enough mother” to include “one who focuses on her child’s needs but is also a fallible human being” (p. 10). Still, given the historically fraught conceptions of motherhood and the ways in which men and women’s lives and domestic

partnerships have changed since the Women's Movement, Phares (1999) notes that "a number of researchers have conceptualized mothering and fathering as feminist issues" (p. 32). Ruddick (1995) and Doucet (2018) illustrate this feminist approach to thinking about parenting. In this vein, Ruddick (1995) advocates giving "adequate weight to the myriad cultural, domestic, and *personal* relationships that structure anyone's experience of mothering and that precede and usually outcast the long years of intensive child care. Among these slighted relationships are those of...the father" (p. xii).

To borrow Ruddick's (1995) phrase, within the field of developmental psychology, fatherhood has at times been treated as a slighted relationship. Newland & Coyl's (2010) interview with Sir Richard Bowlby, son of founder of attachment theory John Bowlby, offers a possible explanation:

I remember asking my father about the role of fathers in attachment theory, but he didn't have a well thought out opinion and finished the conversation by saying: "Well, a child doesn't need two mothers!" By the 1980s my father valued the role of fathers much more, and he talked about the effect on boys of losing their fathers. His recognition of fathers came late in his career, and I suspect his intense focus on mothers has biased researchers and distorted cultural values. (27)

Still, while granting that "Although considerably more attention in the attachment field has been given to mothers," Bretherton (2010) notes in her review of fathers in the literature of attachment, "interest in fathers emerged very early in the development of attachment theory" (p. 9). In her research, Bretherton (2010) highlights the contributions to the field of Ainsworth (1963, 1967), whose work on attachment behaviors included infants' responses toward secondary figures such as the father, grandmother, or sibling. As a result of this study, Bretherton (2010) writes, "In most cases the mother was preferred, and this was especially striking when babies were tired, hungry or ill. At the same time, babies were likely to accept comforting from specific secondary figures if the mother was not present" (p. 10). This finding is

consistent with Komisar's (2017) contention that "An emotionally responsive surrogate caregiver or father can provide support to both mother and baby" (p. 31). Analyzing the findings of a study by Schaffer and Emerson (1964), which consisted of monthly home interviews with 60 mothers across their infants' first year of life, Bretherton (2010) describes how the researchers tried to determine the onset of separation anxiety from specific attachment objects, the father among them. Schaffer and Emerson (1964) found that although in the first six months of life 80% of the infants chose the mother as their primary attachment object, "by 18 months only half of the mothers were still characterised as infants' sole principal objects...In 10 of the 60 families, the father was identified as 18-month-olds' sole principal object" (Bretherton, 2010, p. 11). Responsiveness to the infant seemed to influence the choice more than just physical care or time spent (Bretherton, 2010). "One of the main conditions for secure attachment is a mother's or other primary caregiver's *sensitive responsiveness*, which means that she or he understands a child's signals and feelings, and provides a timely and appropriate response" (Shirvanian & Michael, 2017, p. 100).

Bretherton (2010) also details how Bowlby (1969) reviewed these two studies in the work he did on attachment later on in his career. From his point of view, writes Bretherton (2010), "the two studies had failed to distinguish between fathers as preferred attachment figures and preferred playmates" (p. 11). According to this distinction, children engage with playmates when they are in good spirits, but gravitate toward attachment figures when they feel distress (Bretherton, 2010). Phares (1999) states that fathers devote more time to play-based activities and mothers to caretaking ones. Komisar (2017) states that "Fathers have provided primarily playful stimulation" (p. 123). Across cultures, "fathers use play to connect with their children" (Doucet, 2018, p. 111). Still, in Newland & Coyl's (2010) interview with Bowlby's son, he suggests that the overlap of parenting responsibilities between mothers and fathers may be more nuanced than associating mothers with caretaking and fathers with play:

Now supposing the significance of the relationship between children and fathers is very much greater than that of just a secondary attachment figure. Supposing a father was another primary attachment figure. In families where there are two people raising children, one parent is the highest ranking attachment figure for providing an enduring secure base and haven of safety in times of distress, and the other parent is the highest ranking attachment figure for providing exploration and excitement when times are favourable—different roles but equally significant. There will be varying degrees of overlap between these two attachment roles. (27)

Attachment theorists agree that having a secure base permits children to explore their environment (Bretherton, 2010; Komisar, 2017; Newland & Coyl, 2010; Shirvanian & Michael, 2017). Similarly, Phares (1999) writes about consistency of contact, wherein “Based on object relations theory (or psychodynamic or Freudian theory), infants learn about the world through the consistency of their caretakers” (p. 101). Infants who receive consistent care are likely to go on to seek secure environments and relationships (Phares, 1999; Shirvanian & Michael, 2017). Sir Richard Bowlby, a former scientific photographer for various medical research institutions who has carried on his father’s work by lecturing and writing on the topic of attachment theory, is quoted as saying, “To optimise our chances of being successful we need two distinct systems in place: the first is to know there is a secure base to return to when the activity ends or goes wrong, and the other is having a trusted companion to show the way” (Newland & Coyl, 2010, p. 28), which suggests that fathers may fulfill the role of these trusted companions.

Overall, fathers have been associated with the process of helping the child to separate from the mother (Doucet, 2018; Komisar, 2017; Ruddick, 1995). Komisar (2017) writes that fathers are connected with the concept of independence. Ruddick (1995) goes so far as to declare that fathers represent “the ‘world’” (p. 42). In a passage that has reverberations of this idea, Williams (2019) explains that in certain Native American cultures, “‘Mother Corn’ is often described as the one who grew corn. ‘Father’ is associated with the creation of the universe and

more materially in the bow and arrow as instruments of protection and provisioning” (p. 116). In her discussion of maternal power, Ruddick (1995) contends:

To complicate matters still further, mothers are often expected to relinquish the power they do have and are blamed if they do not. To free themselves of ‘infantile’ dependency and ‘excessive’ intimacy with their mothers, children must submit to and later internalize the Law of the Father. Hence, separation of children from mothers means separation from maternal authority. (110)

As Ruddick’s (1995) critique suggests, the culture often demonizes motherhood, while at the same time it fetishizes it, demanding that mothers take on “the primary task of maintaining conditions of growth” (p. 20). Phares (1999) notes that mothers are penalized for being too close to their children as well as too distant. Hence, this line of thinking underlines the crucial nature of fathers as a bridge to separation (Doucet, 2018; Komisar, 2017; Ruddick, 1995). “Indeed,” argues Ruddick (1995), “mothers often school themselves to trust Fathers and their emissaries, believing that they are *meant* to determine not only the fundamental discipline of a child’s life but also the larger public issues for which it is a preparation” (p. 110). That fathers are associated with the public, i.e, the world, and mothers with the private, i.e. the domestic, recalls thinking that we have seen in the work of sociologists like Blankenhorn (1995) and anthropologists like Williams (2019). In some sense, then, the secure base may be seen as the refuge of the private and the trusted companion as the guide to the world (Newland & Coyl, 2010). Yet it is even more complicated a process than that. First, the secure base is a platform, as in an actual home base; later on, with luck, it becomes integrated in the child's sense of self, accompanying them out into the world, far beyond that original platform. As Ainsworth (1988) said in her remarks about security, “this kind of dependent basis for security was characteristic only of the earliest phase of life...as the child found out about the world in the course of exploration from his secure base he gradually gained knowledge about it and skills to cope with it” (p. 4). In other words, the more the child came to rely upon himself, the less he relied upon

the parents (Ainsworth, 1988). Indeed, Blatz (1940) “seemed to assume that he should be emancipated from his parents and not depend on them any more” (Ainsworth, 1988, p. 4).

Optimally, “Babies need both calm and excitement, which makes a strong argument for a child’s need for both a mother and a father” (Komisar, 2017, p. 125). Meanwhile, while recognizing the increasing awareness of the father’s role, Sir Richard Bowlby also says that this “doesn’t change what fathers have always been to children—good, bad or indifferent, just like mothers; what it changes is the place of fathers within attachment theory” (Newland & Coyl, 2010, p. 28). This desire for fathers as well as mothers to be held to more realistic, human standards is in keeping with Ruddick’s (1995) and Doucet’s (2018) advocacy of parenting as a feminist issue, in which the work of motherhood and nurturing should be open to all and the conversation around which parent does what is more fluid. What all of the literature suggests regardless of ideology is that, in the words of Bowlby’s son, “If dads matter, they matter” (Newland & Coyl, 2010, p. 28). While at first glance these words appear to undercut my thesis, the purpose in these pages is to unveil the many different ways in which fathers do matter; the following section will raise the question if, in addition to mattering, fathers can also be said to “mother” their children.

What Fathers Do

Can Fathers Mother?

For insight into the question of can fathers mother, consider the perspective of feminist-philosopher Ruddick (1995), who expanded the conversation around what constitutes maternal responsibility by writing the following:

Nor is there any reason why mothering work should be distinctly female. Anyone who commits her or himself to responding to children’s demands, and makes the work of response a considerable part of his or her life, is a mother. While most mothering has been and still is undertaken by women, there have always been men who mother.

Moreover, men are increasingly engaged in mothering. Consequently, it is not difficult to

imagine men taking up mothering as easily and successfully as women — or conversely, women as easily declining to mother as men. (p. xii)

Reading Ruddick's book, *Maternal Thinking*, the reader finds themselves confronted with a unique and uniquely flexible sensibility about motherhood. According to Ruddick, giving birth and mothering are separate endeavors. Indeed, part of the mission behind *Maternal Thinking* appears to be acknowledging that emotional ambiguity may be a crucial part of the experience of biological motherhood. Additionally, she incorporates the influence of culture into her discussion, writing, "I see no reason to believe that differences between women's and men's mothering will be greater than differences among mothering women from various races, ethnicities, classes, and cultures" (Ruddick, 1995, p. xiv). At the same time, Ruddick recognizes that there may indeed be differences between men and women in their mothering styles, while arguing that neither is necessarily more valuable than the other. Her criteria for mothering is based more on the spark of personal engagement and aptitude, as when she writes:

A woman is no more, a man is no more, a man no less 'naturally' a mother, no more or less obligated to maternal work, than a man or woman is 'naturally' a scientist or firefighter or is obligated to become one. All these kinds of work should be open to capable and interested women and men." (p. 41)

To this end, social trends support Ruddick's contention that men are more engaged in mothering than before (ElHage, 2017). As of the year 2017, single fathers headed 16.1 percent of U.S. households, which is up from 12.5 percent in 2017 (ElHage, 2017). Interestingly, however, according to a 2013 study 41 percent of single fathers were living with a cohabiting partner, with only 16 percent of single mothers reporting the same (ElHage, 2017); this statistic indicates that single fathers may have more direct, in-house childrearing support than single mothers. That said, even in two-parent households "more and more fathers are taking on the role of primary caretaker to their children" (Komisar, 2017, p. 122). Similarly, Ruddick (1995) observes that "Many mothers, heterosexual, gay, and lesbian, men and women, desire to share with a sexual

partner the duties and complicated feelings of caring for children” (p. 53). In an instance in keeping with Ruddick’s expansive definition of mothering, Komisar (2017) accepts that “there are some fathers who are more sensitively nurturing than some mothers” (p. 123). Again, statistics suggest that many fathers are indeed taking the work of nurturing on more explicitly than they might have in the past.

Doucet (2018) credits Ruddick (1995) as a major intellectual influence on her book-length investigation, *Do Men Mother?*, which studies in depth what she categorizes as the emotional, community, and moral responsibilities of stay at home, single, and shared caretaker fathers. Noting that much of the work on fatherhood has been preoccupied with what makes it different from motherhood, Doucet (2018) highlights the recent developments in looking at “diversity and intersectionality in mothering and fathering” (p. xvi). By intersectionality, Doucet (2018) means “the now central presence of post-modern, post-structural, and post-colonial theories intersecting with feminism...among women and men’s experiences across culture, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and the body” (p. 31). Still, in spite of the increased interest in looking at relations in the world in this way, Doucet (2018) remarks that many people find the concept of men mothering an uncomfortable one. “Quite simply, the ‘Do men mother?’ question elicits considerable tension, both creative and abrasive” (Doucet, 2018, p. 19). Tension interests Doucet, as it did Ruddick (1995). Both scholars share an interest in what Doucet (2018) refers to as “equality feminism” (p. 23), promoted by liberal feminist principles and the work of sociologists studying gender divisions as they relate to domestic labor and childcaring practices. In her research, which consisted of over 100 paternal interviews with men who self-identified as caretakers, Doucet (2018) found that a certain cultural ambivalence still accompanies the identity of fatherhood. After all, as Ruddick (1995) points out, “in most cultures, the womanly and the maternal are conceptually and politically linked” (p. 41). Even today, international studies have shown that the majority of the work and protective caretaking devoted to children

is done by women (Doucet, 2018). “Nevertheless, it has been shown that fathers can and do take on the work of care” (Doucet, 2018, p. 109). Further, Doucet reflects about her research findings:

In addition to confirming that fathers are indeed nurturing, my research confirms that fathers shed a light on *other* kinds of protective care. While preservation and protective care are usually related to closely holding and looking after children, fathers also specialize in the following kinds of nurturing: fun and playfulness, a physical and outdoors approach, promoting children’s considered risk taking, and encouraging children’s independence. (p. 110)

At the same time, Doucet adds, many of the men she interviewed reported believing that their actions, however intentional, cannot necessarily replace or duplicate mothering as enacted by women. This tension slightly complicates the vision of Ruddick (1995), who advocated for a greater understanding that the work of motherhood can belong to more than birth mothers alone. Komisar (2017), a psychoanalyst in practice in Manhattan, argues from the vantage point of prizing motherhood, which seems somewhat regressive and more rigidly gendered in comparison to the thinking of Ruddick (1995) and Doucet (2018). Citing studies that have proposed that the more testosterone there is, the more a man be driven by mating over nurturing, Komisar (2017) writes, “though fathers can be ‘good enough’ caretakers, it is not biologically natural to most men to provide the degree of empathetic care that comes instinctively to most women” (p. 39). As an example, she imagines how a woman might soothe a toddler who has fallen down versus how a father might do it, emphasizing that a mother might show immediate compassion for the child’s welfare, whereas a father might tell the child to pick themselves up. This made up scenario suggests that mothers value nurturing and fathers value self-reliance. As Doucet (2018) remarks, men are often thought to be more concerned with *doing* than with *being*. Certainly, the line of reasoning put forth by Komisar (2017) contrasts with that of Ruddick (1995) and her challenges of some of the more conventional or sentimental assumptions about the primacy of biological motherhood. Indeed, in her book she resists the

sentimentalization of motherhood and mothers as unconflicted nurturers, writing bravely and realistically that at least some of the time, “Mothers infuriate their children and disappoint themselves” (Ruddick, 1995, p. 30). On a more granular level, Doucet (2018) analyzed the findings from her paternal interviews about fathers and emotional responsibilities. Again, the men’s self-reporting appears to reflect a sense that they are capable of less than what they observe or imagine mothers to be capable of, with one father saying of his son, “every time he cries or gets upset...I think *she’s more inclined to go the extra mile to be emotionally connected to him*, whereas my response, in contrast, is to look at it for what it is” (Doucet, 2018, pp. 107-108). Whereas Ruddick (1995) might take exception to the idea that a mother is necessarily more emotionally connected to a child’s suffering than any other committed caretaker, at least some of the self-reportage contained in Doucet’s (2018) paternal interviews indicates an affinity with Komisar’s (2017) seemingly more retrograde views. As with so many factors related to human development, it is difficult to draw conclusions as to which of these arguments is more plausible; still, between social developments showing the increase in fathers as primary caretakers (ElHage, 2017) and the present day cultural sensitivity to diversity and intersectionality in parenting (Doucet, 2018), it would appear that the question “Can fathers mother?” will likely be of deepening interest in the years to come. In a related vein, teachers, too, should pay attention to the ways in which fathers, not just mothers, nurture and assume emotional, domestic, and educational responsibilities for their children.

The Role of Discipline

When studying how parents discipline their offspring, researchers have found that what is sometimes described as “authoritative” parenting may be good for children’s mental health outcomes (Baker, 2017; Phares, 1999). Developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind (1967) came up with the terms “authoritarian,” “authoritative,” and “permissive” to describe different parenting styles she identified in the parents of school-age children (Cherry, 2020). Since then, “experts influenced by Baumrind’s work generally identified the authoritative parenting style as

the best approach to parenting” (Cherry, 2020, para. 25). This style also has been described as “democratic” (Cherry, 2020, para. 4), combining a child-centric style with having high expectations. In the words of Baker (2017), “The well-established literature on parenting style suggests that parental warmth is most beneficial when combined with an adequate amount of control/discipline (i.e., authoritative parenting)” (p. 2336). Contrasting, ultimately less favorable parenting styles range from “authoritarian” to “permissive” to “indifferent” (Phares, 1999). In the authoritative style, parents “show high levels of warmth and nurturance toward their children, but they also provide developmentally appropriate structure and control over their children” (Phares, 1999, p. 28).

In a skills building initiative for Pre-K teachers, Veldhuis (2012), the school’s Director, proposed that they could apply the lessons from Baumrind’s (1967) parenting styles framework to the classroom. Baumrind listed the dimensions of authoritative parenting as nurturance, control, communication, and maturity demands (Veldhuis, 2012). Over a course of monthly meetings, Veldhuis (2012) coached teachers to use these skills with students, finding that this yielded positive results and that highlighting “teachers’ strengths shows respect and trust in the teachers’ decision-making ability” (p. 25). In other words, by encouraging teachers to use this authoritative style in the classroom, teachers felt empowered to discipline their students more effectively. “Knowing how to partner with struggling teachers can be the key to ensuring children’s physical and emotional safety and can lay the groundwork for improving program quality” (Veldhuis, 2012, p. 26). Additionally, the decision of Veldhuis (2012) to borrow research about parenting styles and use it to inform and influence Pre-K teachers shows how much overlap there is between parents and teachers of children at this impressionable age.

Given this discussion of authoritative parenting, it is interesting to consider that throughout history, fatherhood has been associated with cultural notions of the word authority (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 2009; Ruddick, 1995). To this end, Blankenhorn (1995) declares,

“Consider the dilemma of the father’s power. It is a fundamental human problem, shaping psyches and cultures” (p. 93). In an echo of this terrain of thought, Ruddick (1995) writes:

Fathers, historically, are meant to provide material support for child care and to defend mothers and their offspring. They are supposed to represent ‘the world’ — its language, culture, work, and rule — and be the arbiters of the child’s acceptability in the world they represent. In many cultures, Fathers have legal control over important aspects of their children’s lives and moral authority to judge their choices.” (p. 42)

The implication that fathers still may be associated with “the world,” and mothers with the private domain, is a striking, if seemingly slightly old-fashioned, one. According to Phares (1999), “Fathers and mothers tend to have similar developmental expectations and beliefs in disciplinary techniques with their preschool children, but mothers report themselves to be more nurturing and more motivated to promote the children’s mental health than are fathers” (p. 24). This suggests that mothers may still be associated more with the socioemotional realm than fathers, who at least to some extent are still associated with “power” (Blankenhorn, 1995) and “the world” (Ruddick, 1995). The more plausible conclusion is that both parents exert great influence on the socioemotional realm, with Phares (1999) noting that “You may be surprised to learn that infants’ attachment to their mother tends to be similar to their attachment to their father. That is, infants who are securely attached to their mother are most likely to be securely attached to their father” (p. 23). If we regard early childhood educators as “*subsidiary figures*” (Bretherton, 2010, p. 11) in the hierarchy of attachments and agree with Levine and Pittinsky (1997) characterizing them as “significant others” (p. 207), then it follows that children who are securely attached to the grown ups in their lives will be more likely to securely attach to their teachers as well; the presence or absence of secure attachment plays out daily in the classroom, especially during transitions such as as drop-off and pick-up. In his discussion of discipline, Popenoe (2009) underlines the importance of both caretakers by writing that, “What is clear is that children have dual needs that must be met: one for independence and the other for

relatedness, one for challenge and the other for support” (p. 145). Unpacking this argument, it could perhaps be said that the idea of *relatedness* with its implications of nurturing represents the private domain and that of *challenge* with its implication of risk-taking the world. Looked at this way, the early childhood classroom forms a kind of scaffolding between the two.

In an effort to understand these dual contributions to the child's well-being, researchers have scrutinized how maternal and paternal discipline may differ. At least some of the data implies that, while young children may be more immediately connected to their mothers, as they grow up their father's disciplinary style influences their social behavior and presentation in the wider world (Vinopal, 2018). As argued by Popenoe (2009), “It is a father's task to help raise his children so that they can be constructive members of society, to transmit to his children those cultural values they must have to succeed in life” (p. 140). Popenoe's words seem consistent with the contention of Ruddick (1995) that fathers represent the world and society.

Meanwhile, Vinopal (2018) quotes psychologist Tina Payne Bryson as saying, “Dads tend to discipline because they want their children to grow up to do well in the world and not get denied opportunities because they're not well behaved” (para. 12). From this observation, Vinopal surmises that fathers may intend for their disciplinary measures imparted to children when they are young to result in benefits in the long run. Additionally, studies suggest that father involvement in early childhood predicts raising “children with stronger capacities for learning and behavioral control during the earliest years of life” (Baker, 2017, p. 2335). In her own study of a sample of African American, Hispanic and Caucasian fathers and sons that looked at father engagement across toddlers' cognitive and social emotional development in preschool, Baker found that a combination of father warmth and discipline at home positively impacted sons' socioemotional and behavioral skills, speculating that fathers do this “by modeling, teaching and reinforcing positive behaviors in the context of home-based communication and learning activities” (p. 2343).

No matter what, it is important when practicing disciplinary behaviors for parents to be aware of having expectations that are age-appropriate (Phares, 1999). This means that even if fathers may see disciplining their children as paying off in the future, they should not subject them to unrealistic goals when they are still too young to meet them. “For example, if it is cold and snowing, most parents know that there are different strategies for bundling up their child, depending on the age of the child” (Phares, 1999, p. 96), with the ideal outcome being that an older child eventually will know how to pick the right outerwear without any assistance from the parent. This example of picking the correct winter coat is but a small one of how parental structure encourages children to develop a sense of agency. “The issue of risk taking and letting children learn in an independent matter is a more narrow articulation of the wider issue of promoting their independence” (Doucet, 2018, p. 115).

Just as fathers are associated with the word *authority*, they are associated with the word *protection* (Ruddick, 1995). “The first father roles that men and women presumably played in history were protector and provider for women and children” (Popenoe, 2009, p. 140). Blankenhorn (1995) states that while many mothers “tend to define protection as defense, fathers define protection as preparation...As a result, they frequently link the idea of protection to words such as *teaching* and *instilling*” (p. 214). Fathers interviewed by Blankenhorn (1995) offer as examples where they teach and instill discipline by doing things like monitoring children’s exposure to pop culture and technology, neighborhood play, and modeling the sharing of domestic responsibilities with their partners. Furthermore, writes Popenoe (2009), when children receive appropriate discipline from their fathers, they are likely to learn about responsibility, achievement, assertiveness, and boundaries.

More recently, Vinopal (2018) points out that “researchers agree that the role of fathers is changing and that different cultural expectations and behaviors will yield different results going forward...new generations of caring, engaged fathers are a part of a growing dataset to be mined to learn more about what happens when dads discipline more productively” (para. 13).

Some of the fathers who self-identify as primary caretakers interviewed by Doucet (2018) admit to being self-critical about their approach to disciplining their children, with one father specifying that he sometimes finds himself “acting with what would be considered stereotypical masculine responses focused on *doing* rather than on *being*” (p. 113). Phares (1999) also advises fathers that they could learn some parenting techniques from recalling the famous Buddhist saying “Be Here Now” (p. 104), pointing out that the quality of parent-child interaction depends not just on the parent being physically present but emotionally present as well. That a number of the fathers who told their stories to Doucet (2018) reflected on being more mindful of the socioemotional components of caretaking indicates that indeed the role of the father as disciplinarian is evolving in contemporary society. For example, fathers who themselves were raised by harsher disciplinarians may be more likely to soften that harshness in their own approach (Vinopal, 2018). Whereas sociologists like Blankenhorn (1995) and Popenoe (2009) appeared to mourn the father as authority figure as something that was increasingly sorely missing from many households, a philosopher and thinker like Ruddick (1995) warned that “the myth of Fatherhood may be cruel to women and men. I look forward to the day when anyone who actually takes pleasure and pride in his or her children or has authority over their lives also shares in the work of *caring* for them” (p. 43). On a related note, Baker (2017) cites Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory (2005) as a model for the interconnectedness of caretaking influences on the child’s development, which is far more fluid than the older archetype of father as gatekeeper to society. According to this theory, Bronfenbrenner (2005) believed that children respond dynamically across different dynamic interactions that they have within their environments, as opposed to being influenced by their parents alone (Guy-Evans, 2020). In all, “Tracking the ...effects of paternal discipline is, in short, complicated” Vinopal, 2018, para. 2).

The Role of Play. Scholars from many different disciplines have studied the influence of paternal play on human development in the early childhood years (Anderson, St. George, and Roggman, 2019; Doucet, 2018; Komisar, 2017; Popenoe, 2009; Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon,

Cabrera, and Lamb, 2004; Williams, 2019). Overall, play is indispensable in human development and findings have shown that children who do not enjoy enough play may go on to have less optimal developmental outcomes (Popenoe, 2009). Play is so formative that children even “may mimic the play behavior they experience with their own dolls, showing imitation—the basis of human language acquisition” (Williams, 2019, p. 73). While recognizing the universal importance of play with both mothers and fathers, it is necessary to highlight what distinguishes the nature and advantages of paternal play in particular, as described by Popenoe:

For human beings, the father's style of play seems to have unusual significance. Fathers' play is likely to be both physically stimulating and exciting, typically consisting of what has been called a rough-and-tumble approach. Among infants it involves more bouncing and lifting. Among older children it provides more physical games and teamwork that require the competitive testing of physical and mental skills, and it frequently resembles an apprenticeship or teaching relationship: ‘Come on, let me show you how.’ (p. 143)

Other thinkers also have underlined the physicality of fathers' play (Anderson et al., 2019; Doucet, 2018; Komisar, 2017; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004). Fathers may be more likely than mothers to tease their children (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004). Komisar (2017) offers the example of a father throwing a child up in the air and catching them. In his anthropological study, Williams (2019) speculates that during human evolution fathers may have engaged with their infants by carrying them in a simple pocket sling. The paternal interviews of Doucet (2018) confirmed that the rigor of fathers' play promotes an appreciation of the outdoors and risk taking. In exploring the nature of what they also categorize as rough-and-tumble play, Anderson et al. (2019) point out that it may help the child to gain locomotor skills. Williams (2019) discusses the relationship between paternal proximity and the progression from carrying to crawling to walking. These ideas correspond with the assertion of Popenoe (2009) that play is a teaching activity. This makes sense when bearing in mind that play enhances language and cognition skills (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2004; Williams, 2019). In Tamis-LaMonda et al.'s

(2004) study of a racially and ethnically diverse sample of fathers and their partners from a National Early Head Start evaluation study, in which participants agreed to be videotaped for ten minutes at a time of semi-structured free play at home, they concluded that, “Our findings suggest beneficial effects of supportive father engagement for children’s outcomes and offer encouragement to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers who aim to promote positive father–child relationships” (p. 1816). Williams (2019) found that even across different tribes, such as the Trobriand Islanders in New Guinea, one of the guiding goals of fathers’ play is to impart instruction, once again connecting play with refining cognitive development.

At the same time, play is a bonding as well as a teaching activity. “Play interactions, as distinct from caregiving such as feeding or bathing, are thought to be a valuable and pragmatic window into father–child relationships and subsequent child development” (Anderson et al., 2019, p. 890). Anderson et al. ground this conjecture in attachment theory and suggest that evidence of a strong father-child relationship may be hypothesized based on the quality of the play. This understanding of the socioemotional implications of play is imperative because, as Komisar (2017) reminds us, “Human beings are the only mammals that are born very dependent and remain so for a long time” (p. 46). As such, they need to have a secure base (Komisar, 2017). Laserizing in the greater purpose of paternal closeness, Williams (2019) writes that, “The greater frequency and duration of proximate contact between fathers and infants, the stronger the social bonds between them. These social bonds would act to ensure the provisioning of dependent children until the requisite survival skills...were mastered at adulthood” (p. 54). In this train of thought, we see again the relationship between play as an emotional as well as an educational practice. That is, having a secure base with a father, as much as a mother, allows the growing child to begin to leave that base by learning what will amount to survival skills in a new environment. Komisar (2017) calls this process “Attachment First, Separation Next” (p. 57). While Komisar’s main focus is on that of the initial attachment to the mother, fathers, she proposes, offer a launching-point to eventual successful separation. In offering “primarily

playful stimulation [fathers] have been important in helping babies separate from their mothers when they are ready to explore the world of play and independence” (Komisar, 2017, p. 123).

According to the principles of attachment theory, there is a complex interplay between dependence and independence without which optimal socioemotional outcomes are compromised (Komisar, 2017). Play supplies some of the first stirrings of this growing capacity for independence, as when Williams (2019) describes how, “Evidence from the ethnographic record argues that the proximity of fathers helps increase the interaction of infants with social relations outside the domestic sphere when infants are carried” (p. 66). In other words, fathers’ play may help to facilitate the child’s journey from relations inside the home to outside.

Deepening our understanding of fathers’ play, Doucet (2018) observes in the following:

Can the valuing of physical and outdoor activities be part of nurturing and emotional responsibility? I would argue that, indeed, they represent ways of responding to the physical and developmental needs of children...Indeed, fathers’ encouragement of activity and exercise with young children can be seen as having positive physical and mental developmental outcomes. (p. 113)

Therefore, not only is fathers’ play enriching; it is an integral part of paternal responsibility. Anderson et al. (2019) echo these sentiments when they write that, “Fathers who provide both emotional security and cognitive scaffolding by introducing novelty to children during play may simultaneously promote father–child attachment and cognitive development through organization of the exploration system” (p. 891). Their study examined free-style rough-and- tumble play video observations of twenty-five fathers and their two-to four-year-old children, finding that, “Overall, high-quality rough-and-tumble play was substantively and longitudinally associated with children’s prekindergarten social, language, and cognitive outcomes” (Anderson et al., 2019). Analyzing the findings from their study, Tamis-Lemonda et al. (2004) describe supportive paternal play as being “a composite measure of sensitivity, positive regard, and cognitive stimulation (p. 1816),” which also predicts child outcomes. If one

of the objectives of good enough parenting really is “Attachment First, Separation Next” (Komisar, 2017, p. 57), then looking at fathers’ play as a series of scaffolding, from one activity to the next, provides an excellent framework through which to look at paternal relations and human development, with its intricate fusion of the emotional, social, linguistic, and cognitive. After all, notes Williams (2019), Westernized societies value independence and individualism. In this cultural context, play as scaffolding represents a bridge to this developing independence, with the goal of encouraging children to become ultimately interdependent with others (Komisar, 2017) in the larger society in which they are coming of age. For these reasons, it does appear that the paradox at the heart of paternal play is that as a result of establishing an emotional connection through it, fathers are simultaneously fostering their children’s evolving autonomy (Doucet, 2018), this ideally being one of the desired results of supportive parenting.

When Fathers Are Absent

Father Death Versus Father Abandonment

When considering the impact of absent fathers on children’s development, it is worth bearing in mind that there are different reasons for father loss and that each variation may carry different levels of trauma (Blankenhorn, 1995; Brown, 2018; Castetter, 2020; Popenoe, 2009). This overview will look at the implications of father absence in the event of different scenarios, beginning with father death versus father abandonment. Simultaneously, it will consider the ways in which the research suggests that boys and girls growing up in such circumstances may experience loss differently as well (Blankenhorn, 1995; Brown, 2018; Castetter, 2020; Popenoe, 2009).

Writing about the false equivalence between father death and father abandonment, Blankenhorn (1995) puts forth the distinction:

Though paternal death and paternal abandonment are frequently treated as sociological equivalents, these two phenomena could hardly be more different in their impact upon

children and upon the larger society. To put it simply, death puts an end to fathers.

Abandonment puts an end to fatherhood. (23)

The difference implied between the words “fathers” and “fatherhood” recalls the idea that fatherhood is a cultural construct (Blankenhorn, 1995; Doucet, 2018; Popenoe, 2009; Ruddick, 1995). Since some of the scholarship around fatherhood views it as existing on a spectrum between biology and culture (Blankenhorn, 1995; Doucet, 2018; Popenoe, 2009; Ruddick, 1995), this suggests that fathers who stay with their children instead of abandoning them actively choose the work of fatherhood as being meaningful to themselves and their children. “Male biology,” writes Popenoe (2009), “was viewed as inherently suspect and constantly posing the threat of tempting fathers away from home and family” (p. 112). As a result, the work of fatherhood “became something which needed to be promoted by the culture” (Popenoe, 2009, p. 112). In contrast, when fathers appear to rebuff this cultural role due to divorce or separation or by never living in a domestic arrangement with their partners and offspring at all, the research suggests that children are likely to come to internalize this behavior as a purposeful rejection (Blankenhorn, 1995; Brown, 2018; Castetter, 2020; Popenoe, 2009). “The consequences of divorce have detrimental effects on children’s lives, particularly...when the children perceive abandonment” (Brown, 2018, p. 4). As Blankenhorn (1995) contends:

When a father dies, a child grieves. (I have lost someone I love.) When a father leaves, a child feels anxiety and self-blame. (What did I do wrong? Why doesn’t my father love me?) Death is final. (He won’t come back.) Abandonment is indeterminate. (What would make him come back?) (23)

Blankenhorn (1995) thinks that when a father dies he still lives on in the child’s head and “In this sense, the child is still fathered” (p. 24). In her review of the research on the lived experience of fatherless daughters, Brown (2018) notes that, “The daughters’ perceptions of their fathers are impacted by the reason for their absence...If the absence was due to death, perceptions of the father were positive; if the absence was due to divorce or parent separation,

participants reported less favorable perceptions of their father” (p. 2). Popenoe (2009) also makes a crucial distinction between losing a father to death or divorce, noting that “studies have indicated that the negative effects on children of a father’s death are far fewer than those of a father’s divorce or absence through nonmarital birth” (p. 152). Some of these negative effects may include the chances of dropping out of high school or of teens giving birth out of wedlock, with studies demonstrating that children of divorced rather than dead fathers are more likely to suffer these outcomes (Popenoe, 2009). At the same time, children whose fathers have died may display certain social disadvantages, such as findings that suggest that boys may be “submissive, dependent, and introverted—in other words, less traditionally masculine—and the daughters are more likely to be anxious and shy around men” (Popenoe, 2009, p. 152). These characteristics, reflects Popenoe (2009), “are plausible effects of losing a male role model” (p. 152).

Furthermore, after a period of recognized mourning and social support, both mother and child may come to accept the natural course of a loss, possibly idealizing the remembered image of the departed (Popenoe, 2009). At the same time, it is worth recalling that in modern times father loss by death is far less common than it is by divorce or abandonment (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 2009). For this reason, people who work with fatherless children may want to develop a heightened awareness of the issues associated with the latter configuration.

When a father leaves or is absent altogether, girls especially may find their life trajectories gravely disrupted (Brown, 2018; Castetter, 2020). Castetter (2020) writes in her work on the developmental effects of father absence on a daughter’s lifespan that while both fatherless boys and girls suffer, girls may do so even more drastically. “Self-in-relation-theory explains this phenomenon, proposing that the sense of self develops differently in males and females” (Castetter, 2020, p. 2). As Castetter (2020) goes on to speculate:

A male’s sense of self, according to this theory, comes about through gradual separation from the adults in his life. First he separates from the care of his mother, then from the rest of his family, and eventually from any mentors that have helped guide him. They

achieve their sense of self via autonomy and independence. For women however, their identities are achieved through relationships with others...Therefore, the lack of a father-daughter relationship for a girl may make her feel incomplete as an individual. (2)

Strikingly, this formulation of male versus female self-in-relation theory recalls the theories of anthropologists like Lancy (2008) and Montgomery (2008), who write about how the initiation rites of boys in certain tribes are designed to help them separate from their mothers as well as other men, thereby ushering them into a passage of adventure and independence. However, as Lancy (2008) concedes, some of these rites are tinged with misogyny, emphasizing “a distinct focus on teaching boys to feel superior toward and contemptuous of women” (p. 301). This thinking around how children achieve autonomy also brings to mind Ruddick's (1995) discussion of how separation of children from mothers means separation from maternal authority. For girls, meanwhile, the anthropological record often shows that they finalize their own initiation rites by getting married and joining the wider society of their husband's relations (Lancy, 2008; Montgomery, 2008). Still, the way that girls gain social affirmation in anthropological societies is remarkably similar to how they usually continue to go about this in our own modernized one (i.e., by getting married), suggesting that what Castetter (2020) says about women achieving identity through their relations with other people may remain valid. Since scholars have devoted much research to showing the ways in which fatherless daughters may struggle to form permanent attachments to men (Blankenhorn, 1995; Brown, 2018; Castetter, 2020; Popenoe, 2009), heterosexual women who grow up without fathers and do not later find successful primary relationships with members of the opposite sex may experience a good deal of grief (Brown, 2018; Castetter, 2020). Often, “the true effects of father absence do not appear until later in a girl's development” (Castetter, 2020, p. 5). These may include “psychological effects such as insecurities, difficulty establishing intimate relationships with the opposite sex, development of attention-seeking behavior, and negative perceptions of men and

relationships” (Brown, 2018, p. 4). According to Castetter (2020), such adverse outcomes may result as a response to fatherless girls feeling ultimately “incomplete” (p. 2).

Meanwhile, whereas fatherless girls may internalize their devastation, boys may externalize it by acting out, becoming violent, or getting in trouble with authority figures or juvenile delinquent agencies (Blankenhorn, 1995; Castetter, 2020; Popenoe, 2009). What often gets labeled as attention-seeking behavior in girls may get labeled differently in boys (Castetter, 2020). Popenoe (2009) cites the importance of social control as a necessary element that may be lacking as fatherless boys come of age. An abundance of research has looked at the importance of fathers as role models, particularly to young men (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 2009). While the community ties of neighborhoods and extended family play a role in boys’ development, Popenoe (2009) believes that nothing can replace the stabilizing influence of a committed father figure as a proxy for social control. This thinking seems consistent with the discussions of fathers so often being associated with discipline (Baker, 2017; Doucet, 2018; Komisar, 2017; Phares, 1999; Ruddick, 1995; Vinopal, 2018). Fathers, as Ruddick (1995) says, represent “work, and rule” (p. 42). In his discussion of the journey of the father-son relationship, Blankenhorn (1995) writes, “Father becomes freedom. Mother remains necessity. Father, outside. Mother, inside” (p. 90). Overall, research suggests that boys may be most at risk from the effects of absentee fathers in adolescence, that period of sometimes dangerous initiation rites when boys go in search of proving themselves in the outside world (Blankenhorn, 1995). In girls, evidence suggests that the wounds of fatherlessness may linger far later (Brown, 2018; Castetter, 2020). Whatever the difference, Williams (2019) reasonably yet soberly reflects:

Fatherless children fare worse than their counterparts in Western-style and forager societies. The behavioral flexibility of humans allows for an inactive or absent father to be partially compensated for by the attention of other family members and nonkin, but the lack of a strong positive paternal...relationship can never be restored. (188)

Incarcerated Fathers

Sadly, it would be irresponsible for a project about fatherhood not to acknowledge that growing up with a father who is incarcerated is a growing social reality for many children in the U.S., especially for children of color (Couloute, 2017; Yarrow, 2019). Today there are estimated to be two-and-a-half million minor children whose fathers are incarcerated, and nearly 10 million kids whose fathers have been in prison or jail at some point during their upbringing (Yarrow, 2019). Furthermore, writes Yarrow (2019), “A staggering one in nine African American children has a parent in prison” (para. 3). Overall, the estimated numbers “suggest that Black and Hispanic children are up to six times more likely to have an incarcerated parent than their white peers” (Couloute, 2017, para. 2). Additionally, a large number of teens in juvenile facilities are parents, with twenty percent of youth in custody already having or expecting a child (Richeda, Cowan, Cowan, Smith, Perkins, Simmons, Rodriguez, Shauffeur, and Barr, 2015). Far from being an individual punishment, incarceration adversely impacts whole circles of people (Couloute, 2017). With such astounding numbers of children effected, and with so many of them being children of color, all educators who profess a commitment to fighting social justice issues should not overlook their existence. In the words of Lee, Sansone, Swanson, and Tatum (2012):

Often viewed as a social investment, the preservation and strengthening of families has long been a priority of U.S. public policy and an objective of government and nonprofit services. However, the social policy agenda has not included millions of prisoners' families and children...Some characterize the impact of incarceration on families as a family crisis with children as victims. (165-166)

In a similar vein, Yarrow (2019) observes that while “Issues like divorce, single parents, and unmarried, or ‘fragile,’ families, and their effects on children (and adults) have been extensively studied and commented on” (para. 2), sociologists have paid relatively little attention to the experiences of children whose fathers are behind bars. At the same time, argue Lee et al. (2012), “The family values movement, fatherhood initiatives, and child welfare professionals have been greatly concerned with the high number of children affected by

incarceration of parents in state and federal prisons” (p. 166). These movements often have displayed a marked bias toward the importance of marriage, with the rising number of U.S. children being born out of marriage raising concern as a common risk factor in the lives of these children (Lee et al., 2012). Still, “discussions of ‘absent’ fathers rarely note that more than ten percent of fathers who don’t live with their children are incarcerated” (Yarrow, 2019, para. 3). Incarceration therefore constitutes another meaningful form of paternal deprivation for educators to consider.

Even so, incarcerated fathers may “express a deep desire to develop a strong, positive relationship with their children, but they struggle to overcome systemic barriers” (Richeda et al., 2015, p. 25). In their study focusing on the “Baby Elmo” Program, which offers parenting classes paired with child visits to incarcerated fathers and their young children, Richeda et al. (2015) found that fathers “are invested in the success of these visits, which are often the only bright spot for the fathers during their incarceration” (p. 25). As part of its mission to be relatively inexpensive and educationally accessible, the Baby Elmo program uses videos, produced by *Sesame Street’s* Early Childhood Education Department, to provide the bulk of its parenting content (Richeda et al., 2015). As part of the larger goals of this research-based intervention, Richeda et al. (2015) write:

Teaching incarcerated fathers to provide warm, supportive parenting could prove extremely beneficial for children, as several studies have shown that contact with involved, committed, nonresidential fathers can improve child outcomes. For instance, low-income children who remain in contact with their biological fathers early in life show (a) better emotion regulation, academic achievement, and father-child relationships later and (b) less aggressive or criminal behavior than those with absent fathers...Children with a positively engaged father also have better cognitive and social outcomes than do children without an involved father. (26)

Analyzing the results from the intervention, Richeda et al. (2015) found that it contained positive indications for high-risk fathers and their children. Over the course of their before and after interviews with participating fathers, researchers asked questions they later scored using the following three dimensions to describe the quality of the father-child relationship: *commitment*, *acceptance*, and *influence* (Richeda et al., 2015). *Acceptance* and *influence* scores significantly increased post-intervention, with *commitment* scores remaining relatively unchanged. Altogether, findings suggested that “during the course of the program, fathers developed more specific and positive knowledge of their children’s personalities and a greater understanding of their impact on the children’s futures” (Richeda et al., 2015, p. 27). Equally promisingly, “Facilities also became more ‘father friendly’ after the introduction of the program” (Richeda et al., 2015, p. 27), with some of them inviting families to holidays, christenings, and graduation ceremonies in an effort to bring incarcerated fathers and their loved ones together even under these trying circumstances.

In their literature review of incarcerated fathers and parenting, Lee et al. (2012) write that research suggests that many of these fathers may be more invested in fathering than is commonly assumed and that “social welfare and correctional policies should use this knowledge to build stronger bonds and greater support for their children” (p. 166). When men are incarcerated, both father and child experience separation and loss (Lee et al., 2012). Disturbingly, staying in touch by phone can be prohibitively expensive for these families, with telecom providers charging high fees for prisoners to make phone calls to their loved ones (Couloute, 2017). “The exploitative practices of the prison communication industry—which penalize families for trying to stay in touch—amounts to a kind of regressive taxation” (Couloute, 2017, para. 6). The collateral damage of such structural injustices may be serious. Just as children without fathers may have poorer projected outcomes than their peers with fathers, so too incarcerated fathers who report their relationships with their children as being more detached may face additional challenges with “institutional adjustment” (Lee et al., 2012, p. 168)

after serving their sentences. Inevitably, these difficulties with adjustment also will affect the family, underlining the significance of the point made by Couloute (2017) that incarceration is not just an individual problem. Indeed, as early childhood educators are interested not only in social justice but in the concept of interdependence, it is worth stressing that paternal incarceration is a crisis strikingly interdependent in its nature, with the potential for deep disruption and ongoing distress to children and families. As Couloute (2017) cautions:

Parental incarceration is associated with an increased risk of childhood poverty, health problems, school suspension and expulsion, and can be a source of stigma for children as they navigate the world around them. During a period when bipartisan support for reform appears to be in flux, it's important to remember that young lives are at stake when we over-incarcerate. (3)

Furthermore, if children are the victims of the incarceration crisis (Lee et al., 2012), this amounts to them being victims of a certain, particularly pernicious form of fatherlessness. As, throughout this inquiry, I have been strongly concerned with the impact of a father's absence on child development, I would urge educators also concerned with father absence to bear this vulnerable population of children in mind and to remember their obligations as significant others in the attachment hierarchy, should they have them as members of their classroom communities.

Alternative Conceptions. In cases where women elect to use a sperm donor, fatherlessness is a voluntary condition (Popenoe, 2009). This makes it different from cases where the father is dead or absentee, and is a distinctly modern phenomenon (Popenoe, 2009). Writing from the vantage point of the mid 1990s, when such technology was newer, Blankenhorn (1995) described the sperm donor father as being "prototypically modern, even postmodern" (p. 171). Blankenhorn (1995) also saw sperm donor fathers as belonging to the marketplace, "a father of the cash nexus and of short-term exchanges" (p. 171). By being bought and sold as a commercial entity, the sperm donor father gives us more choices and options

(Blankenhorn, 1995). Sperm donorship may be seen as “biology without society” (Blankenhorn, 1995, p. 172), with the erasure of society putting more of the responsibility on the individual to create their own biological destiny. “Moreover,” Blankenhorn (1995), went onto say:

the Sperm Father also perfectly embodies the modernist aspiration of paternity without masculinity. No ‘gender roles,’ no ‘mascu-pathology,’ no ‘splitting.’ Here is a fatherhood that certainly transcends gender. Here is the perfect father for people who believe that men in families are either unnecessary or part of the problem...For these reasons, the Sperm Father is probably the wave of the future. (172)

To the contemporary ear, Blankenhorn’s (1995) reasoning may sound overly harsh, as well as out of touch with increasingly accepted societal realities. After all, there may be any number of reasons why women who are single might decide to move ahead with a pregnancy, even one where no father figure is in the picture; one could argue that innovations in alternate conception represent the potential to liberate women from the common path, in which having a baby is dependent on finding a partner. In this more open-ended vein, Popenoe (2009) notes that “Just as the technologies of birth control have made sex without reproduction possible, new technologies have now extended our options to reproduction without sex” (p. 36). As a result, “the number of single women using this method will undoubtedly grow” (Popenoe, 2009, p. 36). Indeed, the number of women using sperm donors has grown, with the global sperm bank market size projected to expand at by 3.3% over the 2019-2025 forecast period (<https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/sperm-bank-market>). It is not only single women who avail themselves of this medical technology; lesbian couples looking to start a family may use it, as well as heterosexual couples where male infertility may be a factor in difficulty conceiving (<https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/sperm-bank-market>). Recently, too, there has been an increasing emphasis on the option of egg freezing, whereby younger women may elect to freeze their eggs with the end goal of using them with the sperm of a future partner

or a donor, in the event of the absence of the materialization of such a partner (Dockterman, 2021). Disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic to the social and romantic lives of young women still seeking partners has resulted in an increase of interest in this technology (Dockterman, 2021). Then, some younger women freeze their eggs because they do not feel ready to have a child yet, a phenomenon referred to as “social egg freezing” (Dockterman, 2021, para. 8). In general, “Innovations in cryopreservation techniques, rising awareness, emergence of fertility tourism, and increasing access to infertility treatment” (<https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/sperm-bank-market>) suggest that the shape of conception and family formation is likely to be even more fluid in the future and that perhaps even more children than now may be growing up voluntarily fatherless. Moreover, these developments connote a potentially enormous societal shift in the science of fertility, one that educators of young children should well be aware of as they prepare to work with the families of the future. While not necessarily intuitively obvious, it is plausible that such a sea change in thinking about options around fertility may lead to even greater diversity in the configuration of families, all the more reason for educators to develop awareness around this very topic.

For this reason, it is important to ask how children of sperm donor fathers may perceive their experience. Popenoe (2009) characterizes being the child of a sperm donor as “an extreme form of fatherlessness, in which the father is permanently absent, unknown, and often unknowable from the moment of conception” (p. 36). “Psychologically,” writes Blankenhorn (1995), “the Sperm Father is also a fantasy father” (p. 171). In a similarly dark vein, Popenoe (2009) quotes a psychiatrist as saying about patients of his who have been the children of such donors:

It is a big issue for the children. The way they came to be, with no passion, no intimacy, no affection, throws them into a turmoil about who they really are. There isn't even a good basis for fantasy. It is bound to affect their personality development and their sense of self-esteem. (37)

Still, when thinking about the multiple and complex factors that go into child development, we should be wary of saying that one variable is necessarily determinative, and the research about the long-term outcomes of such children is relatively young. It is worth noting that the women interviewed about freezing their eggs as recently as this year do not seem to have internalized cautionary messages about the possibility of eventually raising fatherless children (Dockterman, 2021). With this in mind, it is possible to speculate that this may reflect an attitude of greater liberation and self-agency that could prove helpful when the children of such mothers are coming of age, compared to the biases of the past that considered non-typical reproduction problematic, as found in the works of Blankenhorn (1995) and Popenoe (2009). Additionally, “the sperm donor market is witnessing lucrative growth opportunities owing to the growing acceptance of single-parent or same-sex families in many societies” (<https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/sperm-bank-market>), which suggests a continuing relaxation of prior heteronormative standards. Presumably, the children who are born as a result of these medical advancements will enjoy greater acceptance and far less “turmoil” (Popenoe, 2009, p. 37) going forward.

In the meantime, the sensitivity of educators toward these children in their classrooms helps. Here, paying attention to the words we use to refer to the grown ups in children's lives matters (Provoost, Bernaerdt, Van Parys, Buysse, De Sutter, and Pennings, 2018). Educators can do this by using and modeling language that connotes sensitivity to the experiences of these children around the subject of family formation, whenever it comes up at school. In their analysis of the words used to refer to the donor in heterosexual and lesbian parents and in donor conceived children, Provoost et al. (2018) found that mothers and children can experience trouble when trying to choose the appropriate language. “Those involved in donor conception, whether as a family member or as a professional, are looking for other or more appropriate terms to refer to the donor. Alternative terminology... like ‘birth others’ and ‘reproductive others’ has been suggested for professionals” (Provoost et al., 2018, p. 382). A number of the children in

lesbian-headed households called their donor fathers “seeds” (Provoost et al., 2018, p. 388). At the same time, although the mothers themselves may try to refrain from using words like “daddy” and “father,” young children themselves may latch onto and experiment with saying these words to describe the donor parent (Provoost et al., 2018). Also, in some cases, the word “father” may refer to more than one man, as when the child has a social as well as a donor father (Provoost et al., 2018). That children apparently desire to address the sperm donor father as “Daddy” suggests that some component of fantasy does enter into the psychology of such relationships as argued by Blankenhorn (1995). Teachers should be emotionally delicate in the event that they confront a child enacting some version of this behavior (e.g., a child draws a family picture with two or more fathers).

In a study that also has useful implications for educators, Zadeh, Freeman, and Golombok (2016) conducted interviews with four to nine year old children conceived by donor insemination to single mothers, as well as with the mothers themselves. “Most mothers explained that conversations with their children about father absence were much more frequent than those about the donor” (Zadeh et al., 2016, p. 197). In other words, instead of focusing on the biological father, children more often focused on the absence of a generalized father figure (Zadeh et al., 2016). Children sometimes “made a point of specifying their need for a father with regard to the tasks that he might undertake” (Zadeh et al., 2016, p. 198). This recalls stereotypes we have seen in the popular imagination associating mothers with *being* and fathers with *doing* (Doucet, 2018). Unsurprisingly, a number of mothers reported that their children asked questions about their fathers after social encounters at school (Zadeh et. al, 2016), which highlights the relationship between the school and the family and how children often compare themselves to the family formations of their peers there. As the mother of seven-year-old girls explained to Zadeh et al. (2016):

Something will happen at school and they'll start talking about ‘Why don't we have a dad?’, and that sort of thing . . . I think they're looking at the family unit and realising

that the majority of the other children they know come in a different package . . . there's only one other in their class without a dad. (198)

On a related note, some of the mothers interviewed explained that certain school activities, in particular Father's Day craft sessions, triggered mother-child discussions about father absence (Zadeh et al., 2016). Some of the children themselves even brought up these activities negatively, with one six-year-old girl saying, "I'm not special because I haven't got a dad" (Zadeh et al, 2016, p. 199). Consistent with the theories of Provoost et al. (2018) and Blankenhorn (1995), Zadeh et al. (2016) identified an element of fantasy in children's conceptions of their sperm donor dads. One mother reported of her six-year-old son "I remember him once saying to me 'My daddy works really far away in a different country'" (Zadeh et al., 2016, p. 199). Of course, depending on what stage a child is at developmentally, some fantasy play may be expected, with one of the mothers interviewed pointing out that her daughter had not only a pretend father but a pretend brother, sister, cat, and dog (Zadeh et al., 2016). At the same time, the reasons for these particular children engaging in these particular fantasies about their donor fathers may suggest that deeper issues of compensation for paternal deprivation may be at work in their psychology from a young age. After all, if the sperm donor father is "our most extreme embodiment of the idea that children do not need fathers" (Blankenhorn, 1995, p. 173) and if societal trends and statistics suggest that there may be instances of more such fathers in the future (<https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/sperm-bank-market>), educators and people invested in these children's well-being should ask hard questions about just what it may be that they feel they are missing. Bear in mind, of course, that there will be different reasons for this for different children.

Reflection and Conclusions

To some extent, ending this inquiry with the final section being about father absence makes sense. At the outset of conceiving this project, I had been interested in primarily this

subject, i.e. the effects of paternal deprivation on children. (Disclosure: I myself grew up fatherless. Ironically, I have found, father *absence* can be a strong *presence*. A recognition of the presence of absence has driven my goals in this project all along.) Soon, I realized that this might be too narrow, too over-determined and possibly too negative a focus. As a result, I elected to widen the lens of my research question with the goal of finding out not only what an absence of fatherhood may portend but what the existence of it provides. To put it plainly, just what is that fatherless children are missing, anyway? Are they necessarily really missing anything at all?

The more I thought about this, the more it occurred to me how seldom we ask this question; where child development is concerned, we still place the heavier burden on mothers (Doucet, 2018; Komisar, 2017; Phares, 1999; Ruddick, 1995). Yet, we persist in doing this even in a time of rapidly increasing social change, marked by transforming gender norms and partnership models, alternate fertility options, and family formations (Dockterman, 2021; Zuckerman, 2020). After having done so much research about fatherhood, I believe that the evolving role of fatherhood is not only legitimately of interest at present, but likely will be of even more interest as we go forward against a backdrop of social change. That said, I find when I write these words that there exists a tension. The tension is this. It strikes me from what I have learned that fatherhood may be getting both more and less important.

On the one hand, it may have gained in importance as gender norms soften and as the conversation around more equitable marriages and partnerships continues to be significant, at least as it seems to get reported in first person and media dispatches from middle and upper middle class culture. (I would be remiss in not remaining at all times aware of the imperative nature of culture, especially given that I devoted so much of my research to looking into it and urging other educators to do so as well. Also, that experts have often viewed fatherhood as a cultural construct (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 2009) has been of central importance to many of the ideas in this paper.) I also could argue that if parenting (again, particularly of the middle

to upper middle class persuasion) is widely considered to have become more active in recent decades, it would follow that fatherhood, too, has become more active than, for instance, in the 1950s when Bowlby wrote that the father's main duty was to support the caretaking mother emotionally (Bretherton, 1992). In compelling contrast, Ruddick (1995) and Doucet (2018) offered more open-minded arguments for the roles of fathering and mothering to be open to all interested human beings. Their works feel edgy and contemporary, even Ruddick's brilliant and arresting *Maternal Thinking* from over twenty-five years ago.

At the same time, as the historical work of Popenoe (2009) has shown, the traditional patriarchal role of the father has diminished. Blankenhorn (1995) in particular took a dark and scolding view of this diminishment and its effects on children. From my research, this lessening of the hold of the patriarchy seems to explain a lot about the other side of the equation, i.e., why fatherhood today may simultaneously matter less. These days, the father is no longer the strict authority father of the Colonial era or even the 1950s (Popenoe, 2009). In short, the tumult of the Sexual Revolution made those old paradigms obsolete (Blankenhorn, 1995; Linn et al., 2015; Popenoe, 2009). Also, since then scientists have made enormous strides in the field of alternative conceptions. From the vantage point of Blankenhorn (1995), these are the ill-gotten fruits of "biology without society" (p. 172). While his tone may sound judgmental, from a historical perspective it is extraordinary that women now can bear children not only outside of marriage and established partnerships but without having any existing relationship to a man at all. This fact alone certainly underlines the decline of the patriarchy. Progress in modes of alternative conception has liberated not only lesbians and lesbian couples, but single women as well, many of whom are freezing their eggs, with an increased use of this technology reported since the enormous societal and mating upheavals of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic (Dockterman, 2021). In the twenty-first century, that such upheavals will only continue seems all too plausible.

While these advances have been good for women, I have walked away from this project with my prior qualms that growing up fatherless may be bad for children not entirely assuaged. On some level, I persist in agreeing with Williams (2019), who wrote that “the lack of a strong positive paternal...relationship can never be restored (p. 188).” With respect to this unhappy assertion, I did not find the literature on relational difficulties in grown women without fathers (Brown, 2018; Castetter, 2020) inspiring. Nor do I want to overlook that fatherless boys may confront their own struggles with authority and socialization, especially in adolescence (Blankenhorn, 1995). Finally, paternal incarceration, which disproportionately impacts families of color, amounts to a particularly bleak form of abandonment (Couloute, 2017; Yarrow, 2019). The literature strongly correlates father involvement with not only better academic performance later in life but with such benefits as socio-emotional regulation and reductions in interpersonal disturbances and aggression (Williams, 2019).

Even now, in the literature and paternal interviews about father play and father discipline, we still tend to associate mothers with “being” and fathers with “doing,” locking us in old stereotypes associating women with more communal traits and fathers with more agentic ones (Doucet, 2018). Although today this may sound like a retrograde confession, as a young girl who grew up in a fatherless household, without knowing in the least about terms like “communal” or “agentic,” something about this would have sounded entirely convincing to me; I always felt enveloped in a richly communal web of women, but perpetually longed for a father to teach me how to master and meet physical tasks and goal-posts. (The idea of a father teaching a daughter how to drive comes to mind.) For what I must now conclude amounted to a mixture of temperamental, psychological, and especially cultural reasons, I somehow experienced the loss of a father's presence as more than just the loss of a secure attachment (as if there could be anything “just” about that), but as the loss of an accepted male or patriarchal gatekeeper to society. Similarly, while it would be many years before I encountered Ruddick (1995) pointing out that fathers “are supposed to represent ‘the world’ (p. 42),” the idea intuitively resonated. It

would be interesting to know if young girls growing up in fatherless households today would feel differently and indeed that would be fertile territory for further sociological study. As I hope this paper has demonstrated, culture is not static. Having said all of this, I sadly am still inclined to believe that “Fatherless children fare worse than their counterparts in Western-style and forager societies” (Williams, 2019, p. 188). This gives all the more incentive for teachers who work with such children to care about them.

Still, I equally agree with Phares (1999), who said that “To lament changing family constellations is neither useful nor productive” (p. 94). The reality is that many, many children are growing up without fathers present in the home today (Zuckerman, 2020) and furthermore that teachers will have plenty of opportunities to make a difference in the lives of such children when they have them in their classrooms. To underline this point, it makes sense to return to the discussion of attachment theory at the beginning of this paper (Ainsworth, 1988; Bretherton, 1992; Bretherton, 2010; Shirvanian & Michael, 2017). In children whose attachment style may be insecure, the “*subsidiary figures*” (Bretherton, 2010, p. 11) within that child’s ecological microsystem (Guy-Evans, 2020) may possess great significance. The anthropological record also highlights this point by showing us the enormous range of possible family formations and divisions of caretaking in cultures across the world (Lancy, 2008; Montgomery, 2008). As Williams (2019) points out, “The behavioral flexibility of humans allows for an inactive or absent father to be partially compensated for by the attention of other family members and nonkin” (p. 188). With regard to such children, we might ask if Winnicott’s (1960) famous “good enough mother” phrase (Komisar, 2017) may translate to these secondary caretakers. For fatherless children, is having secondary caretaking figures enough? The answer, alas, is that it may well have to be.

At any rate, with teachers being “significant others” (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997, p. 207) in children’s lives, they bear enormous socioemotional responsibility. This may be especially so in early childhood, when the division between family and school is more porous than later on

throughout elementary school (Keyes, 2000). Also in the early childhood classroom, curriculum often draws directly on the family (Cuffaro et al., 2005). In this context, children without fathers may feel self-conscious and require extra understanding and support. Working models for ways to provide this support follow in the supplement to this literature review.

Handbook for Early Childhood Educators

Introduction

In early childhood education, it is vitally important for teachers to work closely with families as children experience separation from home to school. Given the increasingly diverse parenting structure of today's society, this means that teachers have to understand and affirm a wide range of family formations, including households in which a father figure may not be present. This handbook provides some tools for teachers to achieve this.

Ice-breaker

The following ice-breaker presents a self-guided exercise to get teachers to think about families.

- Close your eyes and picture a family.
- What do you think of?
- Draw a picture.
- What do you notice about your picture?
- What do you know about your family picture that's significant to you?

For example, this is a picture I drew of my family when I was six years old:

What do you notice about this picture? I notice:

- By not including any children, it shows a child's eye view or interpretation of the



grown ups in that child's life.

- There are three grown ups in the picture instead of two.

When I look at this picture, I know:

- The grown ups in the picture are my mother, her best friend and business partner, and a waiter who worked at the restaurant they owned together.
- **There's no father in the picture.**

Fatherless families

This drawing may date from long ago, but today even more children are growing up in fatherless households. In general, family configurations are changing. Nowadays, "There are many ways of being a family...Regardless of family type, children have the right to live in a society where they and their families are accepted for who they are" (Laureta, 2018, p. 3).

- Sadly, many children experience father absence due to rates of incarceration, disproportionately affecting children of color.

- Meanwhile, medical innovations continue to promise advances in alternative conceptions, making parenthood possible for same-sex couples, single women, and others.

Why does fatherhood and family formation matter to teachers?

At all ages, research has shown that parental school involvement benefits student outcomes.

Especially in early childhood education, teachers and parents must work together as partners, with “the child moving between at least two powerful worlds: the world of home and the world of school” (Wasow, 2000, p. 276).

- For young children, the classroom represents a major opportunity for separation from home and the family.
- Typically, parents function as the child's primary attachment figures. Yet teachers also matter in the child's hierarchy of attachments.
- Within the classroom context, teachers may view themselves as the child's “significant others” (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997, p. 207).
- When building trust with families, teachers must become aware of the danger of “*ethnocentric bias*, a tendency to take one's own cultural teachings as general standards of what practices are “‘right’ or ‘best’” (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2008, p. 87).

Suggestions for practice

The early childhood **curriculum** often draws from the home and the family. Children growing up in fatherless households or alternative family configurations may require extra support for these activities. Recognize that **culture** means more than just food and holidays; it also means **communication**.

- Explicitly state in **written and verbal communication** that all families are welcome in the classroom community.
- Read **books and stories** representing different kinds of families.

- If you celebrate **Father's Day** in the classroom, reflect carefully on how to include children without fathers in the festivities.
- Use **Social Studies** as an opportunity for children to make sense of their families and the world around them. Honor the child as “an active making of meaning” (Cuffaro et al., 2005, p. 7) of their own environment and experience.
- Encourage children to make meaning through **art** and **play**. My own drawing shows an example of a child making sense of their family structure and relationships through illustration. In dramatic play, children sometimes even elect to play a game known as “Family.” If you can, pay attention to the relational dynamics that arise from this! Take notes. There may be important things that come up that the teacher might want to communicate to the family.
- Demonstrate sensitivity around **language**. Children of sperm donor fathers may already have their own preferences about how to refer to them. Often, “grown ups” may sound like a more welcoming word choice than “parents.”

In conclusion

Teachers, like children, are active makers of meaning. **Culture is never static and is always changing.** Pay attention to the influence in the classroom of “that invisible but powerful realm called culture—the realm of values, attitudes, and beliefs. Culture...is a human creation” (Popenoe, 2009, p. 196). Teachers are responsible for creating the spirit of cultural and family inclusivity in their classrooms. The next time you ask a student to draw a family picture, think hard about what culture and family mean to you and to the children in your classroom.

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