



# The Impact of Father Absence on Daughter Sexual Development and Behaviors: Implications for Professional Counselors

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## Abstract

Our study investigated the relationship among daughters from father-absent homes, daughters' age of menarche, and daughters' first sexual intercourse. This study was conducted as a paper-and-pencil survey with a total of 12 questions answered by 342 undergraduate female students. Results indicated that females from father-absent homes reported experiencing menarche significantly earlier than females from father-present homes; significant correlations at the  $p < .001$  level were found between first reported menarche and first reported consensual intercourse. There was a significant group difference found between father-present and father-absent homes in terms of the age at which participants reported the first onset of their menarche. As there was a significant correlation between onset of menarche and age of first intercourse, it could be surmised that pubertal timing could serve as a mediating factor between father absence and initial engagement in sexual activity.

## Keywords

father absence, menarche, family, parenting

Professional counselors are obligated to remain current with societal changes regarding family structure in order to be effective in assisting families through transitions and times of stress. Divorce, delaying marriage or opting out of a legal marriage, remarriage, and the creation of stepfamilies are all common occurrences in the United States, and professional counselors must adjust their ideas about family structure in order to be helpful to their clients. Children in particular are impacted by how their families are configured and how families change over time according to decisions adults make regarding the structure of the family.

Father absence in families is more common in this century due to the aforementioned social changes in family structure (Pew Research Center, 2010). In 1960, nearly 9 in 10 children under age 18 resided with two married parents (87%); by 2008, that share had dropped to 64%. Over the same period, the percentage of children born to unmarried women rose 8-fold, from 5% to 41%. It is likely that professional counselors in agencies, private practices, and school settings will continue to see families with absent fathers. It is well documented that father absence and the daughter's age of menarche are related (Moffitt, Caspi, Belsky, & Silva, 1992) and that a daughter's future adult intimate relationships will be impacted by her relationship with her father (Downs & Miller, 1998; Hetherington, 1972; Oates, Forrest, & Peacock, 1985). Our review of the literature focused on fathers' familial roles and the impact of father loss on daughters relevant to their sexual development and sexual behavioral choices.

## The Father's Role in the Family

### *Attachment Theory and the Father's Role*

In an interview with Sir Richard Bowlby, son of John Bowlby, the role of the father in the family related to attachment theory was explained (Newland & Coyl, 2010) by delineating both the mother role and the father role as primary, but in two very different contexts. The mother provides love and security, while the father provides engagement in exciting and challenging experiences (see, e.g., Grossmann et al., 2002). Both roles are essential in the development of children who excel in social situations, and both roles are primary attachments. In the interview, Sir Richard Bowlby described these two primary attachments as one being the highest ranking attachment for safety and security and one being the highest ranking attachment for excitement and exploration (Newland & Coyl, 2010). As such, the father could have significant positive impact on the development of a child, and, conversely, the loss or unavailability of the father figure would presumably have a negative impact (Lamb, 2004).

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In a longitudinal study from 1990 to 2004 (Nielsen, 2006), researchers collected data that showed a majority of the college women who participated felt they had closer, more intimate relationships with their mothers than fathers. The participants reported being more involved in their mothers' lives, and, when parents divorced, the women reported a more distant and strained relationship with their fathers. In another study conducted by Minton and Pasley (1996), fathers' parenting roles of nondivorced and divorced, nonresidential fathers were compared. In comparison to mothers, fathers interacted less frequently with their children, engaged in different types of interactions, were less involved in caregiving, were more involved in play, and displayed less affect to their children.

### Father Loss

The ongoing longitudinal work of Wallerstein (1987), Wallerstein and Kelly (1976), and Wallerstein, Lewis, and Blakeslee (2000) provided a detailed reporting of the impact of father loss during the period of latency adolescence. Children in the older latency age group (9 through 12) showed intense anger at one or both parents and were more likely to develop somatic symptoms, a shaken sense of identity, and a regression in superego controls (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976). For the adolescent group, Wallerstein and Kelly (1987) noted that the normative developmental task of separation-individuation was greatly altered in response to the marital separation and ensuing changes in family structure and perceptions of parents.

### The Father and Daughter Relationship

According to some studies (Fabricius, 2003; Hetherington, 2003; Knox, Zusman, & DeCuzzi, 2004; Nielsen, 1999), father absence due to divorce appeared to have a greater negative effect on the father and daughter relationship than on the father and son relationship. In one phenomenological study (East, Jackson, & O'Brien, 2006–2007), findings revealed that growing up without their fathers in their home was disruptive to the father and daughter relationship, caused the daughters to have hurt feelings and a lack of respect for their fathers, and to have feelings that their fathers were not able to provide the daughters with the relationships they needed.

Although purportedly fathers spend more time with their sons than their daughters (Phares, 1999; Pleck, 1997; Updegraff, McHale, Crouter, & Kupanoff, 2001), researchers concluded that fathers have a significant impact on their daughters' ability to trust, appreciate, and relate well to other males in their lives (Erikson & Erikson, 1998; Flouri, 2001; Leonard, 1998). Other researchers reported that daughters with absent fathers were left feeling disconnected and misunderstood (Downs & Miller, 1998; Hetherington, 1972; Oates, Forrest, & Peacock, 1985; Secunda, 1992).

### The Role of Fathers on Female Development

Some studies covered the wide-ranging impact that fathers have on the development of their daughters. The noted feminist

theorist Robertson (1992) pointed to the patriarchal culture that dominates society as being the major contributor to maladaptive female emotional development. Fitzgerald and Lane (2000) specifically cited the father as being influential in pre-morbid personality characteristics development and maturation of young females. During maturation, children are in the process of learning skills and gaining competence, and some researchers (Billler, 1973; Bronstein, 1988) suggested that fathers are more interested in levels of achievement which can influence achievement attitudes.

The type of father absenteeism and when absenteeism occurred have numerous repercussions on various areas of a daughter's development throughout her life span. Absenteeism that occurred during the elementary and secondary stages of education negatively affected how females performed on standardized achievement tests and IQ tests and was indicative of lower school performance, which can have a lasting impact on their future learning experiences and opportunities (Jensen, Hawkins, & Piercy, 1997). Researchers have demonstrated that early father absenteeism increased the likelihood of lower performance in school and slower cognitive development, especially in the areas of verbal and mathematical skills and possible negative effects on adjustment abilities (Adams, Milner, & Schrepf, 1984; Jensen et al., 1997). During high school years, females without fathers disliked subjects with perceived masculine traits such as math and science and were even instructed against pursuing math and science courses which is attributed to the lack of encouragement and support that a father, acting as a male role model, could provide (Adams et al., 1984).

In the college years, it was noted that daughters from father-absent homes had a tendency to fall into two categories: overachievers and underachievers (Jensen et al., 1997). The overachievers were driven to reach their greatest potential and typically attain higher levels of education such as master's and doctoral degrees in efforts to receive *acceptance* from their absent fathers. Underachievers did not tend to push their educational limits and were content with high school diplomas and possibly attempting college leading either to eventual dropout or, in best cases, attainment of a bachelor's degree.

Some of the reasons behind the difficulties in college performance that father-absent females experienced were noted by Lohr, Legg, Mendell, and Reimer (1989) as being intensified separation anxiety, denial or avoidance of feelings of loss, lost object identification, and object hunger for males. During college, females are exposed to males in a more open setting with less supervision. When coupled with the possible separation anxiety, feelings of loss, object relations issues, and perceived vulnerability issues, Krohn and Bogan (2001) reported that daughters from father-absent homes compared to those with fathers who were present were more likely to marry as teenagers, more likely to become teenage mothers, more likely to become single parents, and more likely to divorce if they marry. Daughters from father-absent homes were also more likely to exhibit antisocial behavior, have self-image problems, tend to have more psychological issues, more instances of depression, abuse drugs and alcohol, and have higher arrest

rates than daughters who have a close relationship with their fathers (Nielsen, 2011).

### ***The Impact of Father Absence on Female Sexual Development***

Williamson (2004) stated that whether absent or present, fathers and father figures play an important role in female psychosexual development. The author noted that a metaphoric erotic relationship with the father or father figure is a necessary precursor to a satisfying female sexual development. Further, Williamson outlined the importance of the father and daughter relationship including historical references to Freud, Bowlby, Klein, Kohut, and Winnicott to name a few.

The impact of father absence on female sexual development is noted by Ellis and Garber (2000) as being one of the main influential factors in the early onset of menarche in young women. Furthermore, Tither and Ellis (2008) in their paired sister study of 93 pairs of sisters from biologically intact families and 68 pairs of sisters from biologically disrupted families found that in the biologically disrupted families, the younger sisters experienced menarche 3 to 4 months earlier than their paired older sisters. In biologically intact families, the younger sisters experienced menarche 1 to 2 months later than the older sisters. In both groups, younger sisters had greater exposure to family absence than older sisters.

### **The Impact of Father Absence on Female Sexual Choices**

In some studies, daughters from father-absent homes were at a particular disadvantage because they had greater difficulties than daughters with fathers forming meaningful lasting relationships with males and were more prone to either become reluctant around males or sexually aggressive (Jensen et al., 1997; Kilmann, 2006). The father and daughter relationship served as a model for how young females learned to interact with and become accepted by males, which left fatherless daughters feeling starved for male attention, especially if they lost their fathers due to divorce or abandonment (Jensen et al., 1997). Young women without fathers in the home lacked a certain sense of security in males, which was present when there was a strong father and daughter bond. The result was that these daughters became more prone to participating in sexual activity at a younger age at a rate 4 times higher than the norm, being sexually promiscuous, experiencing teenage pregnancies at a rate 2 and 1½ times the norm, and having babies out of wedlock (Jeynes, 2001). Further, in another study of 762 females from birth to 21 years of age, researchers (Ellis et al., 2003) found that females from father-absent homes were at greater risk of earlier sexual activity and teenage pregnancy.

### ***Mother's Role***

There are a variety of factors that may influence early sexual behavior in children and adolescents. Evaluating the mother's role in relation to sexual activity is also useful in order to gain

a broader perspective. In the event that a child is raised by a single mother with little to no contact from a father figure, the perspectives and attitudes of the mother in relation to sexual behavior could be influential to the development of both adolescent males and females. Eshbaugh (2008) evaluated sexual outcomes, as they related to children of teen mothers utilizing the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. She found that adolescents were more likely to have had sex prior to age 16 if their mother was a teenager at the time of the birth of her first child. Consistent with research on father absence, Eshbaugh observed from the data that the influence was more pronounced for sons of teenage mothers than for daughters. Further, De Genna, Larkby, and Cornelius (2011) found that daughters of teen mothers were significantly more likely to engage in early sexual behavior, and early puberty for adolescent females strongly influenced early sexual behaviors. Thus, the relationship between the mother and daughter as well as other factors, including the mother's adolescent experiences with sexual behavior, will be of importance in evaluating the context of father absence.

### **Purpose and Rationale of the Study**

The relationship between father absence and the age of a daughter's menarche is well documented (Chisholm, Quinlivan, Peterson, & Coall, 2005). Additionally, researchers have found that the father–daughter relationship impacts future adult intimate relationships (Downs & Miller, 1998; Perkins, 2001) as well as sexual behaviors (Chisholm et al., 2005). Findings in several studies called for further exploration of the father–daughter relationship and the impact of father absence on daughters' sexual development and sexual behaviors (Chisholm et al., 2005; East et al., 2006–2007; Jones, 2007).

Varying family configurations in the 21st century may mean more father-absent families. As such, professional counselors, family counselors, and school counselors might provide increasing services to father-absent families in their counseling settings and will need to know the implications of father-absent families on the daughters in those families. The current study of college student populations provides clinical and counseling applications for a growing segment of society. The purpose of this study was to determine whether a relationship exists between father absence, early menarche, and early sexual intercourse among women in a university setting in the southern United States and to provide implications for counselors working with father-absent families.

### **Method**

In order to evaluate father absence and how that experience may have influenced the sexual development and activities of adult daughters, a study was designed to gather information from women in the United States who were enrolled at a university at the time of this research. Traditional and nontraditionally aged students participated and only undergraduates attending courses within the first 2 years of college-level study were recruited. The research questions are as follows:

**Research Question 1:** Is there a relationship between early menarche, mother's age at first birth, and age of sexual intercourse reported by participants?

**Research Question 2:** Is there a difference between age at first intercourse and age at first menarche for women who report to be raised in father-absent versus father-present homes?

### Design

This study was conducted as a paper-and-pencil survey with a total of 12 questions. Prior to collecting data on the university campus, institutional review board approval was obtained. The principal investigator then contacted several faculty members during the first 2 weeks of the fall semester in order to arrange a time to come by their class. The survey took between 15 and 20 min to complete depending on class size. The research topic was presented fully to each instructor who allowed for entry into their courses. Classes were selected by size (more than 25 students) and generally comprised courses that are typically general requirements for completion of a bachelor's degree. Participants in the survey were required to complete the survey within their classroom and were not permitted to leave the room with it or take it home. The survey administrator encouraged the use of a cover sheet, which was passed out to each participant, to protect their answers from being seen by other participants. The surveys were completed toward the beginning or end of the class time and collected from the students by having them place their survey into a box or envelope carried by the survey administrator. No information was obtained linking a participant to her survey answers. Contact information was given on each cover sheet pertaining to the use of the counseling center on campus if participants felt they needed to discuss any issues that might have been disturbed due to the content of the survey. Information about the researcher was also given if participants wanted to review the results of the study or had any questions about the purpose of the study.

### Participants

The research was conducted using a short 12-question survey of adult undergraduate students at southern universities. The participants were 342 female students enrolled in a variety of undergraduate courses. These courses included a range of subjects such as introductory sociology, humanities, criminal justice, and introductory chemistry. This research was carried out with the permission of the professors overseeing the selected classes. The most common age of participants, or mode, was 18, with 115 participants being of this age. The age range fell between 18 and 49 years with a mean age of 20.7 years. The average or mean age of reported first menarche for all participants was 12 years and approximately 7 months ( $\bar{x} = 12.59$  with months coded using the factor of 9 resulting in a 1.3-month reporting translation for menarche and age at first intercourse). This is consistent with the mean age of menarche of women in the United States,  $12.8 \pm 0.5$  (Anderson, Dallal, & Must, 2003; Golub, 1983), which was the most recent number gathered near the

time of data collection, with a decline in age over the last decade found to be influenced by race/ethnicity (Anderson & Must, 2005).

The average educational level of participants' mothers and fathers was a bachelor's degree. Most participants were single and never married at the time of the survey. Three-hundred fifty-one students were invited to participate, with 342 agreeing to complete the questionnaire, with a response rate of 97%. All participants who completed the questionnaire packet were included in this study. Of the participants, 246 were considered to be from father-present homes, and 96 were from father-absent homes. Father absence included three subcategories of which 26 participants were from single mother homes, 59 were from homes where an unrelated male was present either through adoption by an unrelated family or male presence with the biological mother, and 11 fell into the category of having an adult-related male in the father-absent home before onset of menarche. The national mean percentage for children under the age of 18 living in a two-parent household was 69%, with 27.3% indicating that they lived with only one parent (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). In this study, the percentage was slightly higher, with 38% of homes having just one biological parent present.

Of those 342 participants who responded to questions designed to evaluate experiences of person- and family-oriented stress, approximately 28% ( $N = 94$ ) indicated that they had lived through the divorce of their biological parents. Further, approximately 7% ( $N = 25$ ) stated that one or both of their biological parents were active alcoholics during the time of the participant's childhood. Approximately 6% ( $N = 20$ ) participants reported being sexually abused during their childhood, the majority of which reported that the perpetrator was someone known to them or a relative.

### Instrumentation

The instrument used to collect the data for the current research is a 12-question survey developed separately for the male and female population pertaining to onset of sexual activity and menarche, respectively, with reference to family composition and atmosphere before puberty. Questions concern socioeconomic status during childhood, current pair-bonding behavior, onset of sexual activity, and onset of menarche for the female participants. The eighth item on the survey pertains to father absence and presence of related and unrelated adult males in the home prior to menarche and puberty in order to determine their effects, if any, on the onset of menarche. This detailed question was the source of familial information used for the coding and analysis of the data pertinent to the stated research questions. The box that included the situations of living with both biological parents and the situation of living with the biological father but not the biological mother were both the sources for determining father presence.

Father absence included every other situation that was marked by participants. Participants were placed in the subcategory of single mother if they stated that they lived with a single mom with no other adults present in the home for the duration of the premenstrual lives after their parents divorced or separated. Placement in



the subcategory of unrelated male presence occurred if at any time prior to menarche the participant stated that they lived with their mother but other nonbiological male partners, also lived in the home. Participants who stated they were adopted by nonrelatives were also placed into this category. Participants were placed in the related male category only if they remained living with their mother for the duration of their premenstrual life but had an older (more than 5 years) related male in the home or lived with related family that included an older adult-related male.

Question 9 then pertains to stress that may have been experienced with relation to the family before menarche and puberty, such as divorce, to determine its relevance to the hypothesis that general stress in the family context will affect the timing of menarche. There are also questions pertaining to birth order and sexual abuse for use in future analysis. Finally, questions pertaining to the biological mother are asked in order to determine a possible genetic influence on this timing of menarche in the participants.

### Data Analysis

The first research question was addressed by conducting a correlational analysis to determine the relationship between participants reported age at first menarche, reported age of first consensual intercourse, and the age at which their mother had her first child. An assessment of the second research question was conducted using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare group difference between father-present and father-absent homes in terms of the age at which participants reported the first onset of their menarche.

## Results

**Research Question 1:** Is there a relationship between early menarche, mother's age at first birth, and age of sexual intercourse reported by participants? In order to analyze the first research question, a correlational analysis was conducted to determine the relationship between participants reported age at first menarche, reported age of first consensual intercourse, and the age at which their mother had her first child. Significant correlations at the  $p < .001$  level were found between first reported menarche and first reported consensual intercourse. A significant relationship was found between first reported menarche and the reported age of mother's first birth at a  $p < .05$  level. No significance was found to exist between mother's age at first birth and the participants reported age of first intercourse. Correlational information can be found in Table 1. The shared variance between age at first menarche and reported consensual intercourse is  $r^2 = .048$  (4.8%), indicating that other variables in addition to pubertal timing and menarche play a role in the age at which young women decide to engage in consensual sex. However, menarche appears to be a contributing factor. Additionally, the shared variance between onset of menarche and mother's first birth is  $r^2 = .02$  (2%), indicating that a positive relationship exists, but the contribution of this factor is low in relation to other possible contributors.

**Table 1.** Relationship Between Menarche, First Intercourse, and Mother's Age at First Birth.

Labels	Menarche	First Intercourse	Mother's First Birth
Menarche	1 (N = 342)	.222** (N = 223)	.141* (N = 303)
First intercourse	.222** (N = 223)	1 (N = 223)	.045 (N = 201)
Mother's first birth	.141* (N = 303)	.045 (N = 201)	1 (N = 303)

\*\*Significant at  $p < .01$  (two-tailed) and \*significant at  $p < .05$  (two-tailed).

**Research Question 2:** Is there a difference between age at first intercourse and age at first menarche for women who report to be raised in father-absent versus father-present homes? For the second research question, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. This analysis indicated that there was a significant group difference found between father-present and father-absent homes in terms of the age at which participants reported the first onset of their menarche. The Levene statistic for both independent variables was above the .05 significance threshold, meaning that the variances of the two groups are not significantly different, thus assumptions of the ANOVA have not been violated. The mean age at which women from homes with the biological father present reportedly engaged in first intercourse at an average of 16 years and 8 months ( $\bar{x} = 16.8$ , standard deviation [ $SD$ ] = 2.0). The mean age at which women from father-absent homes reported engaging in first intercourse was 16 years and 7 months ( $\bar{x} = 16.6$ ,  $SD = 1.7$ ), accounting for the 1.3 months difference made to participant reports in order to conduct statistical analysis (months truncated from range of 1 to 11 down to a range of 1 to 9 to fit with base 10 analysis). The mean age at which women from father-present homes reportedly experienced their first menarche was 12 years and 8 months ( $\bar{x} = 12.69$ ,  $SD = 1.6$ ). The mean age at which women from father-absent homes reportedly experienced their first menarche was 12 years and 4 months ( $\bar{x} = 12.31$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ).

For participant reports of age at first intercourse,  $F(1, 220) = .400$ ,  $p = .528$ , indicating a nonsignificant result related to group differences between those raised in a predominately father-absent home during early childhood versus those raised in a home with their biological father. For participant reports of age at first menarche, there was a significant linear trend,  $F(1, 339) = 4.836$ ,  $p = .029$ , where  $p < .05$  (95% confidence interval). To determine effect size, two measures were calculated. To determine a simple benchmark,  $r^2 = .014$  or  $r = .119$ , indicating a small effect. In order to make adjustments for determining the effect size of a sample within a population,  $\omega^2$  was also calculated at  $\omega^2 = .011$  or  $\omega = .104$ , which also serves to indicate a small effect (Kirk, 1996). This result is consistent with previous findings in other studies related to onset of puberty, menarche, and father presence in the home (Bogaert, 2008; Hoier, 2003; Tither & Ellis, 2008). As there is a significant correlation between onset of menarche and age of first intercourse, it could be surmised that pubertal timing could

serve as a mediating factor between father absence and initial engagement in sexual activity (Downing & Bellis, 2009).

## Discussion

### *Implications for Research Questions 1 and 2*

As stated earlier, father absence is more common in this century due to the social changes in family structure (Pew Research Center, 2010). Further, it has been documented that father absence and early onset of menarche are related (Moffitt et al., 1992) and that a daughter's relationship with her father impacts future intimate relationships (Downs & Miller, 1998; Hetherington, 1972; Oates et al., 1985). The results of our study were consistent with previous studies that determined that females from father-absent homes experienced early onset of menarche (Moffitt et al., 1992) and were more prone to participate in sexual activity at a younger age and were at greater risk of teenage pregnancy (Ellis et al., 2003; Jeynes, 2001). Previous studies have not addressed the clinical/counseling implications of father-absent homes relative to the sexual development and behaviors of daughters. The results of this study have implications for families, educators, and professional counselors. Research Question 1 analyzed the relationship between early menarche, mother's age at first birth, and age of sexual intercourse reported by participants. Research Question 2 investigated the difference between onset of menarche of women from father-absent and father-present homes.

**Families.** According to Nielsen (2011), daughters in father-absent families caused by divorce are often leaned on emotionally by the mother. The mother may present damaging messages to daughters about the father's parenting during the marriage and how the father feels about parenting after the divorce. Daughters may not be aware of how the legal system works against fathers or how distressed fathers are when they are allotted so little time with their children after a divorce. The result of the mother's messages about the father may be an attitude of resentment, distance, and sadness on the part of the daughter which may impact the way she will relate to future intimate partners.

The results of our study showed that women from father-absent homes experienced earlier onset of menarche than those from father-present homes and that women who experienced early menarche also reported earlier sexual intercourse than those who experienced later menarche. As such, families that experience healthy divorces in which parents continue to cooperate in parenting and where fathers continue to be involved in their daughters' lives may help their daughters avert poor choices in sexual behavior. Mental health professionals in a variety of settings can be instrumental in assisting families and adolescent or young adult women, as they navigate family changes that may impact their future sexual choices.

**Educators.** Researchers have shown that father absenteeism can impact a daughter's academic achievement (Jensen et al., 1997; Lohr, Legg, Mendell, & Reimer, 1989) in elementary, secondary,

and postsecondary years of education. Professional school counselors promote healthy choices and academic success for students and create prevention programs that facilitate appropriate development among their clients (Erford, 2010). The results of our study may include important information for families and for female students to use in making decisions about sexual development and intimate relationships. School counselors are ideally positioned to offer support groups for female adolescents from father-absent homes regarding relationship issues. Additionally, professional school counselors can provide accurate information to parents and teens regarding the risks associated with early sexual intercourse. School counselors can also identify the need for pregnancy prevention programs and implement such programs school-wide.

**Professional counselors.** Professional counselors often guide families through the process of separation and divorce in family counseling. Our study provides strength for what other researchers have established: the belief that divorce that results in the absence of a parent appears to be specifically damaging to the overall relationship of fathers and daughters and the importance of father presence after divorce or separation (Fabricius, 2003; Hetherington, 2003; Knox et al., 2004; Nielsen, 1999). Licensed professional counselors can facilitate healthy divorce proceedings that support the continued collaboration of both parents in child rearing. Additionally, clinicians can assist families by understanding the factors in family resilience that will aid in healthy divorce processes (Ahrns, 1994).

In the United States and many other Westernized countries, mothers are often viewed as the main provider of child care in that the responsibility of raising children is often assumed to reside with a female parent. This cultural ideology was explained by Bem (1993) in her work on biological essentialism and parental roles. Further to this, Gaunt (2006) found that when fathers attributed their role as being tied to biological ideologies (i.e. hunter/gather—male focus on providing financial support for the family rather than emotional support), they were less likely to be as involved as mothers in child care tasks. When mothers had essentialist perceptions of parental roles, this predicted the number of hours in which the father was involved in child care. These predictive relationships held true even when the effects of employment were controlled for. This study highlighted the influence of gender normative beliefs on the daily lives of families and the parenting structures of families.

As counselors, it is important for us to recognize how this absolutist belief structure can affect families, especially during a process of separation or divorce. Male parents may feel less societal pressure to attend to parenting duties and, thus, may only involve themselves in providing financial support or child support. If a child was the result of a nonmarital coupling, this issue can become even more complicated, as the mother may be reluctant to seek child support due to societal stigma associated with never married single mothers (DeJean, McGeorge, & Stone Carlson, 2013). The issue of parenting responsibility as it relates to gender normative expectations is a very salient concern relevant to the counseling process. It may be useful to discuss parenting roles as a fluid process dependent on child need

and context, rather than one that is strictly defined (i.e., fathers should . . . /mothers should . . . ).

### Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of our study present a need for further research concerning fathers and their relationships with their daughters. Further studies with a diverse sample are recommended. Data collection on the effectiveness of interventions in schools, counseling agencies, and private counseling offices would benefit professional counselors. Additionally, it would be interesting to investigate the experiences of daughters from mother-absent homes to identify whether early sexual intercourse is specific to the father or to either parent. Culturally, the focus on absent fathers continues to be more of a concern, as mothers are typically assumed to be naturally more adept at child rearing (Bem, 1993). This naturalistic or biologically essentialist perspective influences research, court decisions, and role expectations within families.

In relation to children, a national debate continues regarding the ability of adolescent females to control their own changing bodies; however, few students have given *voice* to the adolescents' subjective experiences of pubertal timing (Posner, 2006). Qualitative research highlighting how adolescent females view parenting roles and the influence of their family atmosphere on their development may provide useful insight regarding the topic of father absence. Understanding the perspectives of children and adolescents in single-parent homes may also be important in terms of highlighting the changing cultural attitudes related to parenting roles, marriage, and gender expectations.

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