

Voices for VI Children

Daily News Column, Judith Richardson, columnist
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Title: A key to a child's well-being is their father's close and interested involvement

June is a month when we turn our attention to a remarkable person in a child's life: someone whose presence and involvement can predict long-lasting successes for the child. That person is the child's father.

I can't imagine what my life would be like without my father. I simply cannot conjure up an image of who I would be if I didn't have him in my life.

Decades of research have documented the enormously positive effects that father-involvement have on a child's life. Children with closely involved fathers have higher levels of self-esteem, self-discipline, and empathy for others. They are significantly more likely to do well in school, and to attain economic self-sufficiency than children whose fathers are not highly involved, or who are absent.

Here in the US Virgin Islands, USVI KIDS COUNT Data Book 2005 reports that sixty-one percent of our children are growing up in households where their father is absent. But it also shows us that thirty-nine percent are growing up *with* fathers. Of these children, many have a close, enduring relationship with their father and he, in turn, is highly involved in their lives.

While some dads keep involved from a separate household, those fathers who live with their children are most likely to have this closely involved and supportive relationship with their child.

What's the best predictor of father presence in a family? The simple answer: marriage. Is the father married to mom? The family structure that helps children most is the one headed by two biological parents.

Let's take a look at what happens to children when fathers are highly involved in their lives. While outcomes for individual children differ, reports on overall child populations tell the story best.

Children living with their biological father in married-parent households are five times more likely to escape growing up in 'severe economic hardship,' or poverty. They are twice less likely to be abused than are their childhood peers who live in households without their father. Similarly, children growing up with their biological father are more than twice less likely to use drugs, or to experience health, emotional or behavioral problems. They are two times less likely to fail in school, or to engage in criminal behavior.

How can communities strengthen the bond of commitment between mothers and fathers, and link fathers back to their dependents, for the children's sake?

We need a community-wide, comprehensive approach to improving the lives of children and families.

The *Fatherhood Collaborative of the VI*, now in its eighth year, offers some solutions.

- *A first step*: work to reduce non-marital childbearing among teens and adults. While seventy percent of VI births are to unmarried parents, current figures also show that four out of five pregnancies to unmarried adults and teens are unintended at the time of conception.

- *A second community step*: develop ways to strengthen existing marriages and relationships.

- For single fathers looking to reconnect with their children, *a third step* is to join the Fatherhood Collaborative of the Virgin Islands, an active men's group since 1998 providing child-father activities, speakers and support throughout the year.

- *A fourth step*: provide non-punitive incentives for low-income men to undertake child-support, while enhancing enforcement of paternity and child-support orders for those who can afford scheduled payments.

The overall goal for the community is to help restore positive involvement of fathers in their children's lives, for mutual benefits now and in the future.

For all the closely involved fathers out there, especially mine, congratulations to you! Let us recognize that the job of good fathering is hard work, but it is hard work that pays off remarkably in the end.