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Review of *Fathering at Risk* by James R. Dudley & Glenn Stone

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Fathering at Risk

by James R. Dudley & Glenn Stone
 Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004

Reviewed by Roberta L. Coles

Although it's one of the world's oldest societal roles, fatherhood has been receiving recent attention normally accorded a new fashion trend or a severe social problem. Public and private programs targeting fathers are proliferating. Research and courses on fatherhood, although still relatively scarce, are increasing. The focus, however, is rarely on so-called "good fathers," but rather on inducing so-called "absent fathers" to marry the mother and making "deadbeat dads" pay their child support. In short, government subsidies of programs and research are flowing to make fathers more responsible.

This fatherhood caravan coalesced in response to a concern about the diminution of the father role over the last century. Patriarchal fatherhood was diminished first by the march of the Industrial Revolution, which stole men's sense of self-sufficiency, pulled husbands and fathers from their homes, and provided women a limited, but separate, sphere of influence. Subsequent to the World War II era, the role of husbands and fathers was made more vulnerable in the wake of declining real wages, expanding female employment, and escalating gender wars that correlated with increased divorce and nonmarital births. Underlying this phenomenon is a testy conundrum over the extent to which this new rolelessness of family men is exacerbated by new generations of want-it-all, do-it-all women placing obstacles in the path of men eager to husband and father or by the new generations of displaced fathers and husbands failing to make themselves indispensable to their families by actively engaging in family work the way women have done in the labor force. In this context, attention to the importance of the role of fathers, resident or not, is unfortunately interpreted as discrediting mothers, especially single mothers.

Dudley and Stone have contributed some sensibility to this debate with their coauthored book, *Fathering at Risk*, in which they focus on nonresident fathers (sometimes referred to as "live-away dads" in the new literature). The first section of the book (3 chapters) gives a brief historical overview of American fatherhood, lays out the ideological range of recent fatherhood movements (such as the mythopoetic movement, fathers' rights movement, the Promise Keepers, and so on), profiles various types of nonresident fathers, and reviews the literature on the effect of father absence and presence on fathers and their children over the lifespan.

The lion's share of the book is devoted to issues of concern to current or future practitioners. Taking a holistic and strengths perspective, they counsel practitioners in assessing and addressing the special needs of nonresident

dads at multiple levels of intervention—spiritual, relational, and workplace policies, for instance. In addition, the authors have compiled a useful overview of various policies and specific programs targeting extant or potential fathers. Evaluation of the effectiveness of a few of these programs is included as well.

Several other strengths carry the book. Specifically, the authors disarticulate the types of fathers that could conceivably fall under the nonresident rubric. Unlike much research that collapses all nonresident fathers into one category, Dudley and Stone distinguish among teen, adult unmarried, and divorced dads. The authors decipher the literature indicating that unmarried dads and their children seem to be at significantly greater risk, in part because of their own characteristics (they tend to be younger, less employed, and less educated), but also because they have fewer parental rights and garner little public sympathy. While divorced fathers constitute the bulk of nonresident fathers, never-married dads comprise the fastest growing segment. Teen fathers are a shrinking category and shouldn't be assumed to be equivalent to teen moms, as many teen girls are impregnated by adult men.

However, the book is not without its flaws. Some of the data is not as up-to-date (for a 2004 copyright) as it could be, and the authors present household data and research findings in a light supportive of their contentions that nonresident fathers are proliferating and that children do better when fathers are present. This is not to say that these contentions are incorrect, but Dudley and Stone fail to fully discuss alternative interpretations. This is reflected in the unwed-teen pregnancy and divorce rates they cite, where they fail to point out that both of these trends have stabilized or declined throughout the 1990s and into this century, thus missing an opportunity to address the possible role that men may have played in effecting those declines. For instance, are teen males using condoms or abstinence more frequently?

Similarly, the authors present census data that married-couple families with children have decreased from 40% of all households in 1970 to 25% in 1995 (24.3% in 2000), allowing the reader to assume that the decline in married couples with children was accompanied by an equivalent increase in single-parent households. In fact, although mother-only families with children have increased by about 40% since 1970 (though only by 24% since 1940, when single-mother families were more common), a large portion of the decrease in married-couple households with children is due to the 66% increase in nonfamily households over the same time period. Nonfamily households are (a) those in which young singles or roommates are living together while they get an education or establish themselves in a career, or (b) elderly persons who live alone or with unrelated persons. In addition, married couple households with children have decreased due to lower fertility and an increase in the percent of married couples whose children are grown and left the household.

In the same table, Dudley and Stone follow this statistic with the increased *number* of male-headed families and female-headed families. Of course, the numbers have increased because the population has increased. If they had used numbers (instead of percentages) for the married-couple households, they would have seen an increase as well.

What has increased is the *percentage of children* living with single parents. The percentage living with single fathers has more than tripled; the percentage living with single mothers has doubled. Those increases in the proportion of children living with single parents are largely due to married couples having fewer children and never-married people having more, and those increases indicate that both resident and nonresident single fathering are on the rise (the former more than the latter).

Philosophically, although Dudley and Stone acknowledge a debate about whether any negative effects of father absence are related more to the absence of the father's income or to the absence of his interaction, they only provide research that supports the latter. They also acknowledge that single-parent homes are capable of producing healthy, productive children, but again they occasionally present partial research findings that lead the reader to assume two-parent households do so better. For example, the authors cite a study of a high-crime, inner-city neighborhood that found that "well over 90% of children from safe, stable, two-parent homes do not become delinquents," leaving unaddressed the question of what percentage of children in safe, stable one-parent homes do not become delinquents. It may well be a lower percentage, but good research should not leave the reader to presume that.

Pedagogically, each chapter of *Fathering at Risk* begins by highlighting the main points of the chapter and ends with a set of discussion questions. Sidebars containing information for reflection exercises are sprinkled throughout each chapter; some exercises work, some don't. The writing is readable, but the chapters are divided into so many short sections that the flow is choppy at times.

Nevertheless, *Fathering at Risk* provides a cogent overview of nonresidential fatherhood, a useful programmatic guide to some of the better-developed fatherhood programs across the country, and a vision of for what involved fatherhood (resident or nonresident) could look like. Instead of defining fatherhood solely as coresidence with the mother or by the size of child support payments, the authors paint a fully developed parenting role for dads. Finally, the book's emphasis on improving communication and cooperation between mothers and fathers (married to one another or not) will be a boon to all children caught in a parental cross fire.

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