

# SOME PROBLEMS CONCERNING A MOTHER'S TASK OF UPBRINGING (EDUCATING) BECAUSE OF THE FATHER'S ABSENCE\*

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## 1. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

To try to present a picture of the place and task of a mother as the educator of her children when the father is absent is not easy because the researcher is confronted with so many unproven generalizations and contradictory results.

The thesis that, in the absence of a father, the mother is to be allocated additional educative tasks emanates primarily from the assumption that in a complete family a father and mother do not have the same educative tasks, that each has a different educative charge, that being a father has a different content than being a mother, that a child experiences this difference, and that the absence of either one of the parents, at most, will lead to a quantitative attenuation of the event of upbringing but not to fundamental deficiencies in it.

## 2. AN INVESTIGATION OF THE SIMILARITIES OR DIFFERENCES IN THE UPBRINGING TASKS OF A FATHER AND A MOTHER

The relevant literature offers interesting research results regarding both the thesis and antithesis stated above. This literature is considered briefly in order to get an indication of whether a father's absence confronts a mother with special tasks of upbringing.

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\* Translation by George D. Yonge (1990) of: Enkele Probleme Rondom die Opvoedingstaak van die Moeder Weens die Afwesigheid van die Vader. Unpublished manuscript circa 1976.

## 2.1 Father and mother fulfill distinctly different tasks of upbringing

Psychoanalysis has shown the different place of a father in the emotional life of his son and daughter in the Oedipus- and Electra-complexes, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

De Beauvoir<sup>2</sup> places a mother, in her relationship to her child, very clearly opposite the father and the male world. Also, in the earlier patriarchal family system, an entirely different place was assigned to a father and especially centered on him as an authority figure. Specifically, with respect to the exercise of authority, a woman was certainly a partner but in no sense was she on an equal footing with a man.<sup>3</sup>

The assumption here is that a father and mother each have different tasks to fulfill in the family and, as far as upbringing is concerned, this does not amount to working together in equality but rather is based on distance and separation.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of a father, a mother cannot provide for the deficiencies in upbringing and problems and defects in it then arise.

In this context, a great deal of research has been carried out, and some of it is mentioned here. According to Peterson,<sup>5</sup> a high percent of children from fatherless families come to the attention of social workers and show weak authority because of learning and emotional problems, poor social skills, anti-social behavior, and juvenile delinquency, all of which are failings traced back to the absence of a father. Psychologists think that many tendencies toward sexual perversions, rejection of order, vandalism, senseless violence, avoidance of work and other unconscious forms of protest are directed against the disappearance of a father as an authority figure.<sup>6</sup>

Fournier<sup>7</sup> indicates that many researchers have found that delinquent children as well as school failures more often have divorced parents than children who are not juvenile delinquents. Langeveld<sup>8</sup> mentions comparative research of boys who became fatherless early and boys whose fathers were absent. It was found

that excessive protection of fatherless boys by a mother led to a fear of entering into the challenges of the more distant aspects of life. Several other researchers mentioned by McCord et al.<sup>9</sup> have found a connection between anxiety, alcoholism, homosexuality, femininity and juvenile delinquency in boys with absent fathers. According to Lynn and Sawrey,<sup>10</sup> fatherless boys show greater signs of immaturity when they reach adolescence than boys who have fathers. Goode<sup>11</sup> underlines the above results and says: “At every developmental phase of childhood, the child needs a father....”

## **2.2 Father and mother fulfill basically the same tasks of upbringing**

In our contemporary Western scheme of things, with the growing emancipation and occupational involvement of women, the question is whether it is still important to make a distinction between the place of a father and a mother in the family. Thus, Beets<sup>12</sup> indicates that a mother, in comparison with women of the previous century, is emancipated. In society, she has come to stand beside a man, and this holds for occupational as well as for home life. A father image of 50 to 60 years ago, as it showed itself in the patriarchal family, is clearly changing and in certain cases already has disappeared completely.<sup>13</sup>

Concerning that generalization that attributes specific problems of upbringing to the fact that a father is absent, the research of Herzog and Sudia<sup>14</sup> is particularly important. They do not find a direct relationship between a father’s absence and poor school achievement, juvenile delinquency, or a deficient positive masculine identification by boys. Rather, these mentioned problems are attributed to the social, cultural and economic situations of such families. Fournier<sup>15</sup> also shows that although there is evidence of a relationship between father absence and school failure and delinquency, the latter two are not necessarily a consequence of the former. Also, McCord<sup>16</sup> and her co-workers report a negative correlation between father absence and feminine identification, abnormal fear and general criminality in boys.

Consequently, the above studies imply that the problems of upbringing that arise within an incomplete family cannot be

reduced to the absence of a father, as such and, moreover, that a mother and father do not have essentially different tasks of upbringing to fulfill. The mere fact of father absence, thus, does not lay additional burdens on a mother to take over a father's responsibilities of upbringing. Fournier<sup>17</sup> adds that the complete family is no guarantee for an ideal state of upbringing.

Thus far it seems that neither the thesis nor the antithesis provide a sufficient answer regarding the difference or the similarity of the tasks of upbringing of a father and mother; also, neither gives an indication of whether or not a mother is confronted with different and, for her, abnormal tasks of upbringing in the absence of a father. Below there is a search for a synthesis of the thesis and antithesis by attending to what the reality of upbringing shows in this respect.

### **2.3 The similarity but also the difference between being-a-father and being-a-mother for the child**

In the words of Van der Zeyde,<sup>18</sup> the fundamental idea here is that a father and a mother are a "variegated unity", thus a unitary form of father-and-mother, but that within this unity, a mother and father take different positions as educators, and, according to Beets,<sup>19</sup> represent different things in the child's life that, among others, also have a connection with the gender and the developmental level of the child.

Without fully explicating each facet of the above, some main ideas, especially with reference to the views of Beets,<sup>20</sup> Van der Zeyde,<sup>21</sup> Hansen,<sup>22</sup> and Langeveld,<sup>23</sup> will be considered. A father, just as a mother, is a partner in the educative community, a member of the pair: father-mother, a unity of two persons who are co-guarantors of the existence of their child. According to Van der Zeyde,<sup>24</sup> as far as a child's feelings of security are concerned, this father-mother unity fulfills the same function that a mother initially had fulfilled in the life of her child. Also, Beets<sup>25</sup> asserts that there is no absolute difference between what a father and mother represent to their child. Both are present as adults and, as such, present an image of adulthood to their child. Even so, within this unitary relationship a difference is seen in the upbringing tasks of a father and a mother.

In this respect, Beets<sup>26</sup> asserts that although a father and mother both represent “everything,” namely the present, past and future, still one (father) represents to their child more the present and future and the other (mother) more the present and past. Moreover, he<sup>27</sup> indicates that the helplessness of a child evokes devotion and caring from his mother, and, by this, security. Being with and by his mother acquires a familiar and trustworthy character for a child and thus a pathic (affective) space of safety and security is structured. She represents to her child the realistic “nearby” and intimate aspects of human existence.<sup>28, 29</sup>

Initially, a father is in the background;<sup>30</sup> according to Von Mering,<sup>31</sup> he is “a person at a distance, an intermittent associate or an odd-man-out.” A young child is directed to his mother as a center. His life is strongly intertwined with hers; he lives centripetally. Only later does he begin to increasingly bring to the fore a centrifugal existence. He/she moves away from the center to the outer, and as greater distance arises between a child and his/her mother.<sup>32</sup>

Only after a first structuring has arisen in a child’s daily being together with his/her mother is a father able to fulfill a function, as it were, “from a distance.” According to Beets,<sup>33</sup> during the day, the father is “somewhere” and presently he “comes” home. He is the less familiar, often the less comforting, and thus he represents the wider world, the distant, the future. He is more another, a stranger, but he also is a stranger with whom his child can feel secure. Because he comes from a “distance,” he unlocks the secrets of a wider world. When he is in that world, his child already is also partly becoming familiar with the further lying and unknown. The unknown, distant and future, because a father already finds himself there, is less risky and threatening to his child, and the unknown, distant and future acquire a particular trustworthiness and familiarity and even a character of security to which a child is attracted. Consequently, through a father a wider world, a future world to which a child can move without risk becomes observable and experience-able; here is where a father usually provides his child with the courage to grow up.

The above is summarized as follows: The world presented to a child by his mother is what is nearby, safe, intimate-personal; that

presented by his father is the wider world to which his child goes when he is grown.<sup>34</sup> Frank<sup>35</sup> expresses this as follows: “While the mother is largely responsible for the child’s patterns of intimacy, the father is primarily responsible for the child’s ideals of social conduct and his major aspirations.”

From the above one can agree with Van der Zeyde<sup>36</sup> and Bonekamp<sup>37</sup> that each breach in the unity of father-and-mother is experienced by a child as a breach in the guarantee of his deepest existential security and also in his educative involvement with them. In order to arrive at generalizations, in the following section more specific attention is directed to the forms of father absence and to the educative tasks with which a mother is confronted in such cases.

### **3. SOME FORMS OF FATHER ABSENCE AND THEIR POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS FOR A MOTHER’S TASK OF UPBRINGING**

In reflection, in addition to each form of father absence creating its own problems, the total situation of a family, as well as a mother’s person-structure (personality) contribute to the implications of a father’s absence for a mother’s tasks of upbringing. These tasks, in part, are co-defined by whether the reason for the father’s absence is socially sanctioned (absence because of military service or occupational and professional obligations, death, etc.) or if it is socially disapproved (absence because of divorce, desertion, being unmarried, imprisonment or institutionalization, etc.). For a child to have a hero for a father, e.g., who finds himself in a field of operation where he helps with the defense of his country, is strikingly different from having a disloyal father who has abandoned his wife and children, or one who has disgraced his family and now is serving in prison for criminal acts.<sup>38</sup> It is common to all forms of father absence that the mother must carry the responsibilities for upbringing alone. She must simultaneously be mother and father: she must represent motherly values and construe fatherly values, and with this an important task of upbringing rests on her shoulders.<sup>39</sup>

Below attention is given to a few forms of father absence and their possible implications

### **3.1 The temporary absence of a father, but for a long time**

The fact that each day a father performs his work outside of the family does not in itself give rise to any problems; indeed this includes the possibility mentioned by Beets that a father makes the unknown present. Thus, he forms a necessary link connecting the larger world of human society and the smaller world of the family.<sup>40</sup>

Temporary absence for a long time can embrace relatively shorter or longer periods; absence might occur once in a lifetime, regularly, or merely sporadically. In a father's absence, even if temporary, a mother is confronted with particular tasks, including those of upbringing; she always becomes a key figure in the stability of the family, and her obligations increase.<sup>41</sup> In such cases, whether serious problems of upbringing arise will depend greatly on the mother herself. For example, without fully assuming a father's task of educating, she can, as it were, make his presence felt daily by her child/children and thus in different ways bridge his absence. Thus, she can frequently talk of him in a positive way, bring him to mind, and refer to him with loving understanding and point out what he means for the family. However, some mother's are ill prepared to face this sort of problem or, because of a particular person-structure (personality), they are poorly prepared to carry such a burden. Such a mother can fall into feeling self-pity, frustration and powerlessness, not feel up to carrying out the double role of mother and father; she can even hold the father responsible for her loneliness, all of which present a negative image of him the child/children.<sup>42</sup>

### **3.2 Father absence when a father who is present is "absent"**

For various reasons, a father can be physically present in the family but be psychologically absent and thus become, as it were, a shadow figure.<sup>43</sup> One or another physical disability can lead to a father completely or partially not participate in the upbringing of his child. A physical disability, e.g., because of a long illness, often changes the entire framework of and relationships in a family<sup>44</sup> and can give rise to great tension in the family as well as claim so much

of a mother's energy that she scarcely can realize her task of upbringing.

Also, for reasons other than a physical disability, a father can become a shadow figure in the sense that he leaves the entire matter of educative intervention to the mother. This moral absence<sup>45</sup> often leads to a deeper sorrow and greater damage than physical absence. Then, a clearly defined father image that provides a child with the possibility of choosing something that is easy to follow is denied him. If their son is only provided with an image of his mother, forming him as a person, as it were, is dominated by her motherly example.<sup>46</sup>

### **3.3 Father absence because of separation, desertion or divorce**

The number of families where a father is absent because of separation, desertion or divorce not only is much greater than absence because of death, but they also differ in many respects. If a father is dead his absence is permanent and generally is accepted, as such, while in the cases under consideration, there is the possibility that he can return and this raises a great deal of uncertainty in the family.<sup>47, 48</sup>

A long history of problems usually precedes a separation of a father from a mother and this has already had an effect on the affective stability of the mother and children and, to a great extent, can be a codetermining factor in her success or failure as a provider of upbringing.<sup>49</sup>

With divorce a mother's social position also changes: she must now enter the world as a divorced woman with all of the consequent conditions. Often, she is forced to move, and her divorce is often paired with a loss of economic security. It is very clear that the entire situation of such a mother and her children will disturb any upbringing. According to Fournier,<sup>50</sup> there are certain possible directions she can follow. She can be totally authoritative and act strongly out of a fear that she is different from a woman who needs not fend for herself alone; she can just relax and act indulgently and thereby try to make up for all of the problems that arose because of

the disharmonious marriage relationship, or she can act inconsistently and thereby give rise to additional problems.

Also, it is often the case that, because of her unhappy marital experience, she not only has an unfavorable image of her former marriage partner but that possibly she also mistrusts men in general. Instead of conveying a positive masculine image to her children, masculinity as such becomes denigrated and thus a strong affective relationship that is at the core of unintentional (indirect) upbringing is lost to her children of both genders.<sup>51</sup>

### **3.4 The unwed mother**

Certainly one of the most extreme forms of father absence,<sup>52</sup> and one that also can cause great embarrassment, is where a mother has one or even more children by one or several men without entering into marriage or living with any of them.

Peterson<sup>53</sup> asserts that many unwed mothers experience a very deficient emotionality, deep-seated feelings of worthlessness, and harbor shocking feelings against their child(ren). It is obvious that there will be little appropriate upbringing in such cases. Also, for a mother with a more stable person-structure who finds herself in this situation, nearly insurmountable problems often arise. Although extensive societal changes have occurred, there are still severe prejudices and stigmas attached to an unwed mother and her child and that make her task of upbringing exceedingly difficult.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

It is generally accepted that a really “good” (stable, harmonious, warm, understanding, open to each other’s needs) two-adult family clearly is more advantageous for a child’s general happiness and for his growing up than is a one-adult family. No evidence exists, moreover, that a father’s presence is unimportant for a child’s growing up or that growing up without a father is not a lack. It is also generally accepted that a mother in a father absent family is faced with especially great challenges of upbringing. Many mothers are faced here with the double task of “homemaker-childrearer” and “breadwinner.”<sup>54</sup> As such, these are tasks that she must actualize

without the psychological and physical support of a marriage partner to help her with the household obligations, family decisions, and all of the demands involved in educating her children. For many mothers, a father's absence includes a reduction in income as well as in social status and social activities; this is coupled with a struggle against her becoming vindictive, isolated and self-condemning. For her, this can be a struggle against being over-protective and/or over-controlling, a struggle against forcing her child to enter an early adulthood, or against excessively protecting him. This can also be a struggle against feelings of guilt about the father's absence.

What is more, a combination of factors can arise that are connected with a father's absence. The emotional state of a mother will certainly influence her declining possibility to brave her new position, while her new social situation will have an additional affective influence. Further, economic factors will touch all aspects. Together, these aspects will lead to diverting a mother's physical and psychological energies that are required for her to satisfy the material and especially spiritual needs of her children.

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