

The quality of a father-child relationship effects intimate relationships in adulthood

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Recent research at the University of Haifa School of Social Work revealed a connection between father-child relationship and the ability to achieve interrelation intimacy in adulthood. The research, conducted by Dr. Nurit Nahmani, examined the quality of father-child relationships among three groups: orphans, children of divorced parents and children of intact families. 82% of the children of married parents reported being involved in an intimate relationship while only 62% of the orphans and 60% of the children of divorced parents did.

The research, which was supervised by Prof. Yossi Guttman and Dr. Amnon Lazar of the University of Haifa, evaluated 231 women and men between the ages of 22 and 32. The orphans surveyed in the study lost their fathers between the ages of 6 and 12 and the participants of divorced parents, experienced the absent of their father during the same period of childhood. The research used various parameters to measure both the participants' father-child relationship and their capacity for intimacy as reflected in closeness, sexuality and commitment with their adult partners.

The findings noted barriers that limited the ability to develop intimate relationships with their partners among those whose thoughts of an absent father caused a marked rise in negative emotions and distancing. The results also noted a correlation between a balanced father-child relationship (in terms of closeness and distance) and the ability to form and sustain intimate relationships in adulthood. "The results showed that orphans and children of divorced parents experienced different emotional connections with their fathers. The orphans tended to idolize their fathers, while children of divorced parents tended to feel frustration and anger towards their fathers," explained Dr. Nahmani.

The study also noted that a greater feeling of loss towards one's father meant a smaller chance of establishing an intimate relationship in adulthood.

"A feeling of loss is connected to the ability or lack of ability in the long term, to adjust to the loss of a father and to experience a change in the relationship with him. 41% of the participants whose father was permanently or partially absent reported a feeling of loss, often accompanied by a fear of being abandoned a second time and reported not being involved in a relationship," she continued.

Another finding in the study is a connection between the emotional relationship with one's father and the capacity for experienced intimacy in desire, participants who reported being emotionally distant from their fathers reported difficulty in entering into intimate physical relationships with their partners. However, the study revealed a higher level of closeness and commitment in orphans and children of divorced parents when in an intimate relationship. According to Dr. Nahmani, this finding shows that the potential for developing intimate relationships exists even when a father was absent during childhood. Those who overcame their difficulties as they matured made it possible to establish quality intimate relationships.

"The research found a definitive connection between the quality of the father-child relationship and interpersonal relationships later in life. It is vital that we continue to research the long-term effects of losing a father in order to answer the needs of these children over time," noted Dr. Nahmani.

Source: University of Haifa

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