

USA TODAY WEEKEND



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USA TODAY SPORTS

Fatherlessness is harder on Father's Day, but 'father figures,' other role models fill in

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This is what Father's Day means for children who may not have someone to call 'Dad' but find that kind of support from someone else. USA TODAY



(Photo: Delana Brown)

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Father's Day is different when there's no father around.

"What do these days mean to children like me who had to grow up without one parent in their lives?" asks Louis Steptoe, 18, who just graduated from high school here. Instead, he celebrates what he calls "Father Figure Day" and honors his godfather, William Ford, who "was always present."

Kaylynn Tobin, 12, of Rockville, Maryland, met her father only once, years ago, and barely remembers him. Her sister Aras, 10, has a different father and sometimes gets gifts from him. But she doesn't have a good relationship with her father.

"I don't think of my dad as a father," Kaylynn Tobin said. "I don't think of him as anything."

Steptoe and Tobin are among the millions of children across the United States who are growing up in one-parent households without a father in their lives. Fatherlessness during childhood has become a major part of American life due to divorce and the rise of having children outside marriage. Overwhelmingly, these one-parent households are led by women.

But there is new momentum in cities including Washington to reconnect fathers with their children. Much of that push has come from the African American community, where black fathers are twice as likely to live separately from their children as white fathers, according to research in 2011 by The Pew Research Center.

Getting, staying connected with fathers

Frank Love, co-sponsor of the Father-Daughter Reconciliation Project, is shown with the five children he helps to raise - his two from his first marriage and two with his current wife, whose niece is also part of the family. Although his parents divorced when he was young, his father remained - and remains - a big part of his life. Family photo



More than one in four fathers in the United States who have children 18 or younger now lives apart from their children, according to Pew.

A movement is growing toward shared parenting or at least collegial “co-parenting” that recognizes the importance of having two parents in children's lives. And in states like Virginia and Kentucky, legislation was recently passed to encourage joint custody.

At the same time, federal health officials, educators, doctors, social workers and researchers are developing programs to help children deal with the absence or departure of a parent and the other traumatic events known as "adverse childhood experiences" (ACEs). By improving children's coping skills, they hope to improve their mental and physical health, and increase life expectancy.



Although many fathers stay active and attached to their children even if they don't live with them day-to-day, millions are essentially absentee dads – gone if not forgotten.

“Not having that father is much more traumatic than people have appreciated in the past,” says Jonetta Rose Barras, author of "Whatever Happened to Daddy's Little Girl: The Impact of Fatherlessness on African-American Women." “Family is a messy institution, but it's the only institution we have that even when it's done in a flawed way, really prepares a child for functioning and thriving in the world.”

Jonetta Rose Barras is shown speaking at a co-parenting awards ceremony her Esther Productions co-sponsored with Frank Love. (Photo: Ja'Kayla Mordecai)

'Something gets broken'

Shawn Hardnett's father didn't acknowledge his paternity until Hardnett was in his 20s. Today, Hardnett, a longtime teacher and school administrator, thinks fatherlessness is "the greatest trauma that young people face." The longtime teacher and administrator had absentee fathers in mind when developing the all-boys charter middle school he is launching this fall in Washington.

Without an active father in their lives, boys' identities become "locked into the oldest male who is in their space," said Hardnett. That person could be a coach, or teacher, or someone who is a very bad influence.



Administrators at the new all male charter middle school for boys are, left to right, Landon Jones, founding operations manager, Kerel Thompson, founding science, engineering, technology and math instructor, Shawn Hardnett, founder and CEO, and Joseph Speight, founding operations director. (Photo: Antonio Hardy)

Hardnett said he thought there "must be something wrong with me" because his father wasn't around. So like his brothers, he made "all the wrong decisions 'wrong' people make." That included eating so much he ballooned to 325 pounds. His two brothers used crack cocaine and alcohol, he said, to dull their pain.

"When the father's not there, something gets broken that cannot be fixed," he said.

The staff of North Star College Preparatory Academy for Boys will be nearly all male for a student body in which half of the students live with only one parent, most likely their mothers. The teachers have been learning "the mechanics of relationship building" when dealing with young men who have faced the trauma of growing up fatherless, says Hardnett.

"We're being very deliberate about teaching adults, 'How do you respond and react to behavior you don't like?'" he said.

School asked for 50 male mentors, 600 showed up

Although fatherless boys have gotten more attention over the years, lacking a father hits girls just as hard, says Barras, founder of the non-profit Esther Productions, which works to help girls and women, particularly those who grew up without a father.

Sometimes, mothers even impede efforts for reconciliation with a father, Barras says, because they don't want the father of their children back in their lives.

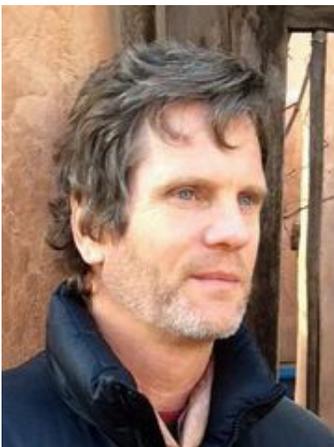
"The horrible relationship that the mother and father had sometimes serves as the biggest variable," she says. "She hates him because of whatever he did."

And the cycle continues.

"People without a father are kind of adrift and feel alone and abandoned," says Los Angeles-based psychiatrist Judith Orloff, author of six books including *The Empath's Survival Guide*. "They choose mates to try to fix them, to somehow heal the relationship with the father, thinking they could heal this person. But then they get abandoned over and over and over."

That pattern accentuates the pain for the child who already feels deserted by their birth fathers only to lose stepfathers and other men in their mothers' lives.

"Children learn from their parents' generational patterns of abandonment," said Orloff. "It could go on for eons."



Orloff's partner, Corey Folsom, just met his 83-year-old birth father for the first time. Folsom was raised by "fine adoptive parents" after his college student mother put him up for adoption in an orphanage in the early 1960s, but Folsom says he always felt there was a "missing piece."

"When I would try to imagine my birth father, I would think, 'He doesn't want me so I don't want him,'" says Folsom, a life coach who specializes in relationships. But after finding his father "alive and kicking and well, I felt an expansion in my heart."

Corey Folsom, a life coach who specializes in relationships, met his father for the first time in November 2017. (Photo: Courtesy of Corey Folsom)

Trauma of fatherlessness

Having a parent leave the home permanently can cause trauma in a child's life, just like having an incarcerated or physically abusive parent, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which developed the method of tracking adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs.

"Children, youth and young adults who have experienced trauma are three times more likely to develop serious mental illness and substance abuse later in life," said psychiatrist Elinore McCance-Katz, assistant secretary for mental health and substance abuse for the Department of Health and Human Services.

'Father abandonment' can lead to many challenges in childhood, but they can be overcome

Nearly half of the nation's children under 18 – 46% – have experienced at least one traumatic event, including sexual abuse, neglect, incarceration of a parent, being a victim or witnessing community violence, or the death or absence of a parent, according to a January report by HHS' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

At a recent program for Mental Health Awareness Day held in Washington, McCance-Katz and other experts advocated that teachers, doctors, social workers and psychologists use a "trauma-informed" approach to dealing with children who are struggling in school, doing drugs or expressing other bad behaviors.

"We need to change the questions we ask them to "What happened to you?" from "What's wrong with you?" said Gabrielle Carlson, a psychiatrist and president-elect of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

Despite reunion with father, teen still celebrates what he calls 'Father Figure Day'

"We need to look at disruptive behavior through the lens of trauma," said Patrick McCarthy, a physician and CEO of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a nonprofit that advocates for low-income families and children.

That's the kind of "trauma-informed" teaching his new charter school will focus on, says Hardnett.



Hardnett says he was luckier than many young men of color because he grew up with a stepfather who he thought was "amazing" and who "stopped a lot of things from happening that would have happened if he wasn't there."

That's helped make him a strong advocate of a two-parent family.

"No matter what we tell ourselves in society, a child who lives in the house with a mother and a father who are married to each other is still the best place for a child to grow up," he said. "There's a cultural attack on the nuclear family as old and passé, but the data still suggest that people who grow up in them are getting a whole lot more done."

Los Angeles psychiatrist Judith Orloff is the author of six books, including *The Empath's Survival Guide* (Photo: Bob Rita)

Collegial co-parenting

Kids love their parents, "and they're terrified to lose either of them," said physician Ned Holstein, who founded the nonprofit group Fathers and Families after his own divorce and custody battle in the late '90s. The organization is now called National Parents Organization, and it has been lobbying for shared parenting laws across the country.

On July 1 in Virginia, a new law will take effect that supports co-sharing of parenting after divorce. More than 20 states have considered these laws, but only a few have passed ones that Holstein considers adequate. Groups including the National Organization for Women and many domestic violence activists often oppose them. They say women who left violent partners should not be forced to share parenting and are often at a disadvantage financially to fight their ex-partners in court.

In January, the Journal of Child Custody published an update on child development research surrounding what's best for kids when parents divorce or separate. Linda Nielsen, a Wake Forest University professor of adolescent and educational psychology, analyzed 60 studies over several decades and countries and concluded shared parenting is better for children than single parenting on almost every measure of well being.

Black fathers, a closed Facebook group, was started in 2009 to create a network where black fathers could "work together to change the face of fatherhood and the conditions in our families and communities." It has more than 41,000 members.



Left to right: Co-parenting advocate and attorney Scott Bolden, Sunshine Muse, who won the first annual co-parenting award with ex-husband Yohance Maqubela, Frank Love, who co-sponsored the award, and HyeSook Chung, Washington's deputy mayor for health and human services.

(Photo: Ja'Kayla Mordecai)

Barras and co-parenting advocate Frank Love are collaborating in Washington on an effort to encourage co-parenting by those no longer romantically involved but who work together well raising their children. The effort launched in Washington and has attracted the most interest from African Americans but includes parents of all races, says Love.

"So many children who grew up without their father suspect it had a big effect on them and have turned into parents who determine that it's time to do something different," says Love, whose parents divorced when he was young but continued to share parenting duties.

Often, there is a narrative and belief that says, "We have to be at odds with one another when raising a child or children" after a break-up. This is not always the case, and there are powerful examples of families that are proving this, he said.

"We are taking it upon ourselves to capture the stories and perspectives of these powerful families, and to celebrate them for the shining examples that they are to their children and community."

Barras and Love recently gave a couple, Sunshine Muse and ex-husband Yohance Maqubela, the first of what will be an annual co-parenting award. They divorced while Muse was pregnant with their second child. She now splits her time between Sante Fe, N.M. and the Washington area, where Maqubela lives. Still, they share responsibilities for raising their children, despite the distance.

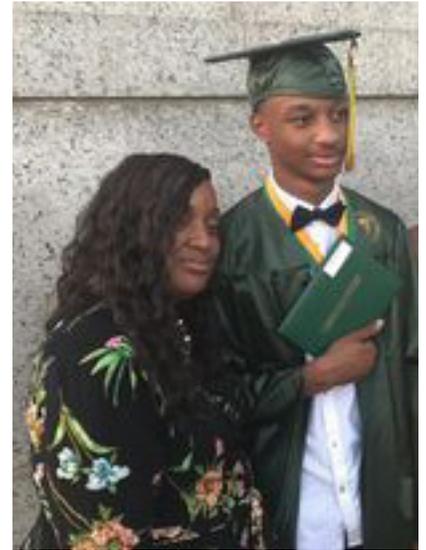
"At first, no one day was like the next," said Maqubela, who keeps in touch daily using Facetime and Skype for homework sessions. "But there was the feeling and the understanding that things will get better. There was the general commitment to our children."

Even if some once-absent fathers come back into the picture, children can be reluctant to let them in.

"My life was perfect the way it was. My mother, my sister and me," Steptoe says.

But now that he's talking more frequently with his father, he says: "Better late than never."

Contributing: Karla Lozano and Janiya Battle,



Louis Steptoe is shown at his graduation from Archbishop Carroll High School this month with his mother Delana Brown.

(Photo: Family photo)