“As a little girl, I was diagnosed with polio. Doctors predicted I would never walk again. My mother said, ‘Not only will you walk, you will run!’ I believed my mother!” This little girl was Wilma Rudolph, who won the gold medal in the 100-yard dash in the 1960 Olympics.

A great deal has been written about the mother-daughter relationship and its impact upon adolescent girl development (Straussner & Brown (Eds.), 2002; Ackerman, 1999, Sanders, 2001). In addition, a Hawaiian study followed children from birth to age eighteen, and the results revealed a profound negative impact from maternal alcoholism. Writers have also chronicled the impact of fatherlessness on sons and its link to addiction (Reel, 1997; Sanders, 2006). Less has been written about the father-daughter relationship and how it impacts substance use among adolescent girls. This article focuses on the influence of involved, responsible, and committed fathers as a protective factor against substance use disorders, and the impact of the absence of fathers as a risk factor for substance use disorders and other problems, on their daughters. Intervention strategies will also be discussed.

What Involved, Responsible, and Committed Fathers Provide for their Daughters

Research reveals that involved fathers can have a positive impact on adolescent girls, thus decreasing their risk of heavy drug use (Ackerman, 1999; Barras, 2000;
Sanders, 2001; Coma, 2000; Bisnaire, 1990). According to these authors, some of the positive benefits include:

- **Positive impact in utero** – The involvement of fathers decreases overall stress on mothers during pregnancy and decreases the risk of miscarriage.

- **Greater birth weight** – Involvement of fathers during pregnancy leads to higher birth weights for newborns. There is a relationship between lower birth rate, learning challenges, and premature death.

- **Nurturing and affirmations** – This increases the chances of healthy self-esteem, which serves as a protective factor against heavy substance use.

- **Decreased risk of sexual abuse** – Research reveals a relationship between the absence of fathers and an increase in sexual abuse among adolescent girls. The great majority of women who become chemically dependent were exposed to sexual trauma as teens.

- **Confidence**

- **Increased probability of healthy relationships** – A pattern of unhealthy relationships increases the risk of substance use disorders among adolescent girls.

- **Attention**

- **Increase in financial security**

- **Increased probability of academic success**

- **Healthy attachments**

- **Decreased risk of substance use disorders**

**The Impact of Fatherlessness on Adolescent Girls**
There are myriad ways in which fathers can be absent from the lives of their daughters. The three most common forms are death, divorce, and abandonment. Of these three primary forms, abandonment and divorce have a more devastating impact (Barras, 2000; Griffin, 1998). When the father dies, many girls are able to deal with this without blaming themselves for his death. With divorce and abandonment, girls are more likely to see these losses as reflections of something being wrong with them, i.e., “I must not be smart enough, pretty enough; my hair must not be long enough; perhaps I am unlovable.” These internalizations can lead to a great deal of self-abuse, heavy substance use, and other problems (Sanders, 2008; Coma, 2000; Barras, 2000; Sanders, 2001; Griffin, 1998). Collectively, these authors make the following points about the impact of abandonment by their fathers on adolescent girls:

- Increased risk of substance use disorders
- Increased risk of teen pregnancy
- Depression – Increased risk of self-medication through illicit drugs
- Decreased feelings of security – Some teen girls will turn to delinquent males for pseudo security. As these males have a high risk of being involved in delinquency and drug use, adolescent girls who migrate toward them are at increased risk for involvement in the criminal justice system and drug use.
- Increase in violence – Girls abandoned by their fathers experience a great deal of anger, and some will strike out aggressively toward younger siblings and peers in order to express that anger.
• Toxic shame and abandonment issues – People often medicate these painful emotions with the use of alcohol and other drugs.

• Father hunger – Girls abandoned by their fathers often yearn for male attention. Some will date older males in response to the absence of their fathers. Others will spend a lifetime emotionally yearning for their fathers; for them, Father’s Day is not a day of celebration, it is a national day of mourning.

• Rift with the mother – Many children blame their mothers for the absence of their fathers. This tension in the mother-daughter relationship can further exacerbate the adolescent girl’s problems, leading her away from home and increasing the risk of negative environmental influences and drug use.

• Promiscuity – “So many people want me; why can’t my father see how desirable I am?”

• Increased risk of gang affiliation – The absence of fathers can lead to feelings of needing protection. Gang affiliation can provide such an outlet.

• Decrease in emotional intelligence – Emotional intelligence is defined as the ability to separate thinking from feelings. Abandonment impacts emotional intelligence, leaving daughters more vulnerable to destructive relationship patterns and abuse.

• Unresolved grief – One’s way to numb oneself from grief is the use of drugs.

• Difficulty trusting men

• Self-abuse – Suicide attempts, cutting, substance use
• Spiritual distress – “God, how have you let me suffer so much without my father?”

This plethora of problems accompanies girls with substance use disorders into chemical dependence treatment. These issues, if left unaddressed, have the ability to extend and haunt her even into adulthood (Sanders, 2008; Barras, 2000). Clearly, intervention strategies are needed.

**Intervention Strategies**

There are a number of strategies that are helpful with fatherless girls as prevention and interventions as they enter chemical dependence treatment (White, Kurtz, & Sanders, 2006; Corey, 1996; Sanders, 2008). These strategies include:

1. Talk therapy – to address issues of abandonment, which can contribute to the development of substance use.

2. Grief work

3. Reading – particularly biographies, which tell the stories of girls and women who experience fatherlessness and are still able to achieve successful lives.

4. Gestalt therapy – experiential exercises geared toward helping girls verbalize the pain of fatherlessness, thus facilitating healing

5. Treating the cover-ups – gang activity, promiscuity, substance use disorders, etc.

6. Mentorship

7. Involved grandfathers and uncles – Although they are no substitute for her father, a supportive, loving relationship with uncles and grandfathers can be healing.
8. Involvement in sports – This increases confidence and feelings of belonging, and decreases the risk of teen pregnancy.

9. Coaching for young fathers – As mentioned earlier, adolescent girls abandoned by their fathers are at increased risk for teen pregnancy. The fathers of babies born to teen mothers are likely to abandon their children, thus creating future generations of children abandoned by their fathers. Outreach to the fathers can help decrease the stress on teen mothers and also impact future generations.

10. Recovery coaching – Adolescent girls leaving treatment often have a number of challenges to continue to address. Recovery coaching in her natural environment can be helpful, particularly in early recovery. The adolescent girl can suffer from father hunger as a result of being abandoned by her father. This injury/wound can lead to self-abuse and heavy substance use. It is clear that she does not deserve to be abandoned, and it is equally clear that, as she enters chemical dependence treatment, she deserves the best treatment possible, including that which focuses on the impact of fatherlessness.
REFERENCES


http://nces.ed.gov./.tubs/ce/c97005.html


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mark Sanders, LCSW, CADC, is a member of the faculty of the Addictions Studies Program at Governors State University. He is an international speaker and consultant in the addictions field who has provided training and consultation throughout the United States, Europe, Canada, and the Caribbean Islands. He has had two stories published in *Chicken Soup for the Recovering Soul* and is co-author of *Recovery Management* with William White and Ernest Kurtz.

Shannon Mayeda, PhD., LCSW, CRADC, is an Associate Professor at The University of Southern California, where she teaches mental health practice and theory courses in the Master of Social Work Program. She has 26 years of clinical experience assisting adolescents and adults in their complex struggles with addiction, severe mental illnesses, and homelessness in the urban and multi-cultural environments of both Los Angeles and Chicago.