

## UPF Office of the Family: Research Infers Mothers and Fathers are Irreplaceable

Lynn R. Walsh  
March 14, 2024



**New York, United States** – Coinciding with the annual session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), UPF’s UN Office organized a program titled, “Irreplaceable Motherhood and Fatherhood for Children and Society.” This event examined the neurobiological research on children’s natural dependence on their relationship with their mother and father for optimal development. The topic was striking because, sadly, the importance of mothers, and especially fathers, is seldom discussed during CSW programs.

The program was held on March 14, 2024 at the Nigerian Mission in New York. This session was one of twelve programs held during the Conference on the State of Women and Family.

Many mothers find themselves without a responsible and loving father for their children, and many have to leave their babies in childcare to earn a living. Of course, as is discussed during CSW, women’s employment is key for their advancement and sometimes even for survival.

However, **Ms. Erica Komisar**, a licensed clinical social worker, psychotherapist, parent coach, and author of “Being There: Why Prioritizing Motherhood in the First Three Years Matters,” presented hard-hitting evidence that early and prolonged separation of children from their mothers puts children at risk. Noting the general and deep decline in children’s and youth’s mental health, she said that decades of research force the question: As we push for mothers to work, can we assume there is no impact on young children?

Ms. Komisar explained that infants’ brains are fragile and the mother, for the first three years, is like “the

infant's central nervous system." Responsive mothers provide emotional regulation, stress protection, and biological support for healthy attachment. To an infant, his or her mother is the world. Research affirms that when a baby is separated from its mother, cortisol, the stress hormone, floods the developing brain. Frequent stress causes a baby's brain to become hyperactive or "hyper-vigilant," which can inhibit the child's ability to form healthy emotional, social, and learning capacities throughout life. There is a clear correlation between early stress, poor attachment, social inabilities, and a risk for mental health problems.



Ms. Komisar said that babies in childcare have been found to have elevated stress hormones and show more anxiety, aggression, and hyperactivity than peers cared for at home. Early childcare can cause "negative social-emotional outcomes ... into young adulthood." Ms. Komisar sees a correlation between the increased use and younger age of institutional childcare, the rate of 22 percent of adolescents being suicidal, and a 400 percent increase in children suffering from depression and anxiety since 2012. Ms. Komisar closed her talk with C.S. Lewis's words, "Children are not a distraction from more important work. They are the most important work."

**Dr. Tim Rarick**, professor and program director of marriage and family studies at Brigham Young University-Idaho, presented on "Fathers' Unique Gifts for Children, Mothers, and Society." Despite the growing number of involved fathers, there is an increase in single mothers and a crisis of father absence in the world. In the United States, nearly 25% of children live without a biological, step, or adoptive father.

Dr. Rarick presented evidence that fathers impact their children differently from mothers. Engaged fathers tend to increase their daughters' emotional security, self-reliance, and academic, professional, and relational success in life, and in relationships. Rarick referred to one study summarizing that "Fatherless girls hold a distorted view of themselves in which they define their worth by their success in using their bodies as sexual objects ... and are enticed by their ability to sexually manipulate men." This correlates to an over-dependence on male approval, low self-esteem, and an increase in alcohol abuse, number of sexual partners, sexual abuse, addiction to social media, self-victimization, and depression.



According to Dr. Rarick's research, boys with involved fathers are more likely to have a healthy view of masculinity, treat women and girls with respect, share equally in family responsibilities, avoid gangs and criminal behavior, achieve academic and professional success, refrain from fathering children outside of marriage, and provide or co-provide for their families. Father-son relationships are integral in teaching boys self-control and moderating aggressive behavior. He quoted Dr. Brad Wilcox, "Boys who do not regularly experience the love, discipline, and modeling of a good father are more likely to engage in what is called 'compensatory masculinity,' where they reject and denigrate all that is feminine and instead seek to prove their masculinity by engaging in domineering and violent behavior."



Dr. Rarick stressed the need to reverse our culture that demeans men and masculinity and devalues fathers' essential role. Policy makers need to acknowledge the "father factor" and family factor" in order to strengthen society. Instead of leaving boys to play video games for hours, or watch pornography, educators must use male-oriented pedagogy to help them find their gifts and pro-social purpose. Furthermore, he stressed the need to abandon the falsity that gender is solely a social construct, and respect the benefits of biologically based sex differences, while challenging stereotyping that holds either sex back.

Dr. Rarick stressed that men's uncommitted sexual liberties have undeniable negative consequences for single mothers and children, including poverty, vulnerability to physical harm, poor mental health, social disadvantage, and low educational achievement. Instead of sex education that encourages self-centered recreational sex, children need to acquire self-awareness, self-discipline, and skills in friendship building, problem solving, effective communication, and the joy of serving a higher purpose than the self.

Studies show that understanding biologically based gender tendencies help mothers and fathers understand and respect each other, and find ways to cooperate. Acknowledging these proclivities benefits everyone: mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters. Mutual commitment and balancing by a mother-father team is truly irreplaceable for children and society – and well worth the effort it requires.