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The Importance of Fathers

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There was a time when many authorities discounted the role of fathers in families. They believed that fathers were merely a biological necessity. As a result, researchers primarily studied mothers and their children.

Recently, scientists have *discovered* fathers. Researchers learned that fathers were not "optional family baggage." Studies show the importance of a caring father in the life of a child, boy or girl.

Why Fathers?

Much has been said recently about fathers and fatherhood, even in the political arena. In his 1992 presidential nomination acceptance speech, then-governor Bill Clinton gave a terse warning to fathers who fail to meet their child support obligations: "We will find you." In his book *Standing Firm*, former vice president Dan Quayle wrote, "A society that promotes the idea that a father's role is irrelevant breeds irresponsibility." Vice President Al Gore held a White House conference to launch the nationwide "Father to Father" movement. Organizations such as the National Fatherhood Initiative and The Fatherhood Project have spurred

community-based programs in father involvement.

Concern about fatherhood is not new. People worried about the absence of fathers in the 1880s when men went in massive numbers from farm to factory. Similar concerns were voiced during the 1930s when the Great Depression left millions of men unemployed, dependent on bread lines. However, the current focus on the importance of fatherhood is supported by research, especially over the last three decades, that points out the critical importance of a father's involvement with his children.

Trends in Father Involvement

There are two major trends in American fatherhood today: father absence and father involvement.

A large and increasing number of children are being raised without the continued presence of a father. Fatherhood historian Robert L. Griswold, notes that while the number of American families since 1970 has risen 20 percent, the number of mother-only families has increased by 51 percent.

While there has been father absence throughout history, accord-

ing to Dr. James Levine, director of The Fatherhood Project, four elements distinguish this trend from any other time in American history:

Quantity. The number of children who are growing up or who will grow up without the continual involvement of a father is unprecedented. In earlier times, the major reason for single motherhood was the death of the father. However, in 1998, the greatest number of children were growing up in father-absent homes because of unwed motherhood and divorce.

Acceleration. This trend is accelerating, affecting an increasing number of children. Between 1950 and 1998, the percentage of American children living in mother-only families has climbed from 6 percent to 23 percent.

Concentration. The lack of male presence in certain inner city neighborhoods with high proportions of unwed mothers is unprecedented.

Repetition. This pattern is likely to be passed from one generation to the next. In one study of fathers who were behind on support payments, one half had grown up in father-absent homes.

Children face greater risks growing up without a father in the

home. According to researchers Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, who have collected the most extensive and thorough data on this topic, “Children who grow up in a household with only one biological parent are worse off, on average, than children who grow up in a household with both of their biological parents, regardless of the parents’ race or educational background, regardless of whether the parents are married when the child is born, and regardless of whether the resident parent remarries.” Children reared in single-parent families may suffer from greater depression and emotional distress, may exhibit greater behavioral and learning difficulties in school, and may be forced to take on adult responsibilities at an early age. In adulthood, children from single-parent families are more likely to have lower educational and economic achievements, have an increased likelihood of forming single parent families themselves, and may have difficulties forming lasting relationships with partners.

Adolescents who live some time of their childhood in a single-parent household, which most often are mother-only families, are twice as likely to drop out of school, twice as likely to have a child before age 20 and one and a half times as likely to be idle—out of school and out of work—in their late teens and early young adult years. (These risk factors can be moderated when single-parent families have increased income, close ties with family, friends, and community, and when children have a positive relationship with the non-resident parent as well as the resident parent.)

Fathers Throughout History

From letters, literature and other accounts, a picture emerges about the role fathers have played throughout American history. In pre-industrial revolution times, fathers played a central role in the family. Researcher Alan Hawkins explains,

“Prior to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, fathers were intimately involved in the daily lives of their children. Fathers taught their children how to work and worked along side of them, especially sons. Fathers were also responsible for teaching their children spiritual values and to read and write, if they were literate themselves.”

With industrialization and urbanization came the separation of the work sphere from the family residence for most families. Fathers typically left home to work in factories and were separated from their families not just for eight hours, but often for 14-16 hours. Fathers often worked in wretched conditions. This work away from home hindered their role in domestic affairs. Fathers more often were “absentee managers” and became more emotionally distant.

More recently, a new kind of father is emerging, resembling more closely those of pre-industrial eras. This father still plays a major breadwinner role but is also more involved in domestic tasks and caring for children. There is a difference between this public image and private reality, however. For example, recent data from dual-earner families suggest that fathers only spend about 33 percent as much time as mothers in direct, one-on-one interaction with their children and two-thirds as much time being available for their children. Nevertheless, this represents a trend toward increasing father involvement.

Research on Father Involvement

Father involvement makes a real difference. Whether the outcome is intellectual development, sex-role development, or psychological development, most kids do better when their relationship with Dad is close and warm, whether Dad lives with them or not.

Here are some findings about the unique role fathers can play in a child’s life:

Early Development

- Children form attachments to fathers as well as mothers from age 7-13 months. By 15 months, a greater percentage of children would respond with “Daddy” when shown their father’s picture than would respond to their mother’s picture.

- During the first weeks in a baby’s life, when moms are usually at home, dads become the child’s “most significant other.” It is through the father that the baby first learns about comings and goings, transitions, separations and non-mother nurturing.

- Fathers are as capable as mothers of caretaking, demonstrating competence, and being sensitive to a child’s needs. Fathers, like mothers, pick up on the meaning of an infant’s cry and react appropriately. Fathers are actually better at keeping a baby’s attention. Caregiving differences between mothers and fathers appear to be due to training and experience, rather than any innate qualities of mothers or fathers.

- Children whose fathers were actively involved with them during the first eight weeks of life managed stress better as school-agers.

- Premature infants whose fathers spent more time playing with them had better mental outcomes at age 3, whether their father resided in the same house or not.

Play

- Fathers are often seen as playmates. Play is a more prominent part of father-child than mother-child relations. Fathers are more likely to initiate rough and tumble play while mothers play more traditional children’s games like peek-a-boo and engage in more teaching.

- Children prefer Dad as a play partner, but more often go to Mom in stressful situations.

Modeling

- Sons of nurturing fathers are more likely to model and internalize their modes of thinking and problem-solving.

- A close and warm relationship with Dad fosters a daughter’s sense

of competence—especially in math skills, and a secure sense of femininity.

- The economic support of the family, more than half of it provided by the father's income in the average two-parent family, contributes to the rearing and emotional health of their children. Fathers play a major role in preparing children for life outside the family. Father's level of education and success on the job is linked with his child's intellectual abilities. Fathers' emotional support to others involved in direct care (i.e. Mom) influences the well-being of children.

Later Development

On average, when compared with children of less involved fathers—

- Children of highly involved fathers show increased cognitive competence, increased empathy, enhanced school performance, greater motivation to succeed, enhanced social development and self-esteem, less sex-stereotyped beliefs, stronger sexual identity and character, and more intrinsic motivation.
- Children of highly involved fathers have fewer psychological and behavioral problems, are less likely to become delinquent, and are less likely to use drugs.

Personal and Family Benefits

- Fathers, also, benefit personally from their involvement. Men's sense of personal happiness and satisfaction is more strongly linked to their family roles than their work roles. Men who do not put "all their self-concept eggs in one basket," and who invest in children, have better overall health and lower levels of psychological distress. Involved fathers tend to be more giving and caring when they reach middle age. And, contrary to expectation, involved fathers can actually achieve high levels of job success. For instance, in one four-decade study, involved fathers were more likely to have advanced in their occupations, when compared with less involved dads.

- In two-parent families, when

Dad is actively involved with the kids, Mom's stress level goes down, and both parents feel more fulfilled. This has a positive impact on the parents' marriage and on the children.

Being a Great Dad

As a father myself, I think being a dad today is more complicated than it used to be. Dads were once expected to "bring home the bacon" while Moms raised the children. Nowadays, the message is different. Dads should still be a major breadwinner, but more is expected, regardless of whether or not Mom works outside the home. He should be willing to change diapers, dress children, cook meals, clean house, volunteer at school and help do all those things that his wife used to be expected to do alone. There is a clear message out there: Dad, you ought to be a more nurturing and involved father and Mom, you need to let Dad get involved.

What are some keys to effective fatherhood? Here are some ideas for dads taken from the research.

Nurture your marriage first.

If you are a married father, an important key to good father-child relationships is to have a strong relationship with your wife. If things aren't going well there, it's easier for bad blood between you and your spouse to spill over into the parent-child relationship. Someone once said that the best gift a father could give his children was to love their mother.

Sometimes in our drive to be involved fathers, we spend our limited free time with the children but at the expense of time alone with our wives. To guard against this, plan first the time you will spend with your wife. Try planning a weekly "date night" that involves just you and your spouse—NO KIDS or any others. Daily rituals such as reading the mail together, sharing a magazine article, calling each other on the phone, or snuggling close during a favorite TV program are also great ways to stay

connected. For more ideas on strengthening your marriage, check out the MontGuide "Strengthening Your Marriage" (MT 199718 HR).

If your marriage went sour and you are now a divorced father, focus on maintaining a civil relationship with your ex-wife. Never bad-mouth her in front of the children when they spend time with you. Maintain a cooperative parenting partnership. See the MontGuide "Families Facing Divorce" (MT 199514 HR) for other co-parenting ideas.

Prioritize fatherhood. Some dads worry that by emphasizing family so much they will lose their edge at the workplace and not be as competitive for positions as those who lack family ties or neglect them. Research doesn't support that fear. Plan your work around your family. Decide that father-child time is not negotiable, but work time is. With calendar or planner in hand, schedule first the activities of your children, the school concerts, the one-on-one times, then write in your work obligations.

Get involved with your child from the beginning. Remember, there is nothing you can't do for a baby—except breast-feeding. And even if your wife is breast-feeding, you can still establish a role for yourself: bathing, burping, comforting and taking the baby out for a walk.

Learn the fatherhood craft. Keep up with the language of child rearing. Talk to other dads informally or in support groups or parenting classes. Read articles and books about good fathering. A list of resources is found at the end of this publication. In too many families, the woman becomes the "expert" and Dad feels excluded. Don't let that happen to you.

Have regular one-on-one time with each child. Sometimes it's fun to talk while you're doing errands or making home repairs, but be sure that there are times that you turn off the TV, put down the newspaper, and give your kids your undivided attention.

Schedule a daddy-daughter or daddy-son date occasionally. Go out to eat a favorite meal or to do an activity the child enjoys. Sit with them occasionally just before bed and talk about how the day went.

Show affection often. Even if older kids seem squeamish, kids enjoy a hug and encouraging words now and then from their dad. With the older kids you may want to do this in private, though, rather than in range of their friends.

Take kids to work. This is a great way to teach them about the world of work that you are a part of. Take kids with you on business trips when possible.

Stay connected when you have to be away. Sometimes work takes dads out of town. Set up a routine to stay connected. Some families schedule a specific time Dad will call that is convenient for all members of the family. When you return, bring home something special for the kids. It need not be extravagant. My younger children have been thrilled to receive wing pins from an airline.

Teach them. No dad has every gift or skill. Kids may learn certain things from other males in their lives. Use opportunities to share *your* talents. In my family, I lack mechanical ability, but I have passed on the gift of music through providing piano and drum lessons to my children.

Connect with your child at all levels. Make sure you have some contact with every aspect of your child's life. Visit the school, meet the teacher and kids and have at least fleeting contact with an after-school activity. If you have seen

where your children are and met their friends, you will have more to talk about and more interesting conversations. Parent involvement during children's schooling is critical to their school success. Work with your employer to see that your work schedule doesn't preclude your involvement in your child's schooling.

Conclusion

Yes, fathering is more than a biological necessity. Our children's growth and development is enhanced through active, involved fathering. Below are some recommended resources that can help you and me be great fathers.

Recommended Resources for Fathers

Books

Levine, J. A., & Pittinsky, T. (1997). *Working Fathers: New Strategies for Balancing Work and Family*. New York: Addison-Wesley.

Shapiro, J. (1993). *The Measure of a Man: Becoming the Father You Wish Your Father Had Been*. New York: Delacorte.

Sullivan, S. Adams (1992). *The Father's Almanac*. New York: Doubleday. *Loaded with activities to do with kids.*

Brott, A. A., & Ash, J. (1995). *The Expectant Father: Facts, Tips and Advice for Dads-To-Be*. New York: Abbeville Press.

Videos

The Expectant Father (45 minutes) *Helps answer questions and alleviate fears of first-time dads of any age.* Available for \$14.95 (plus shipping) from XENEJENEX, Health Care Communications, Six Tower Office Park, Woburn, MA 01801 (781) 938-9922 Fax: (781) 938-3644. URL: www.xenejenex.com

For Dads Only (39 minutes) *Teaches expectant and new dads the tricks of the childcare trade.* \$24.98 (plus shipping) from Cabot Video (1-800-469-7977, URL: www.cabotvideo.com/fatherhood/). If you order by phone, mention the source code number (77111) and have the item number (1148) on hand.

Check out these sites on the 'Net:

National Center for Fathering (<http://www.fathers.com/>)

National Fatherhood Initiative (<http://www.fatherhood.org/>) (To reach them by phone, call 1-800-790-DADS.

FatherWork (<http://fatherwork.byu.edu/>)

The Fatherhood Project (<http://www.fatherhoodproject.org/>)

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