


When Fathers Step Up: *Is It Worth the Trouble?*

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It is the primary task of every society to teach men how to father.

— Margaret Mead, Anthropologist



Evidence that Men Respond to Children

- ▶ Biological equity & the colicky infant
- ▶ Touch and smell recognition
- ▶ Spontaneous speech patterns

Evidence that Children Respond Directly to Men

- ▶ 6 wk olds respond differentially to mother/father
- ▶ Toddlers use clearer behavioral cues to father
- ▶ Preschoolers use more advanced speech with fathers

Distinguishing Paternal Behavioral Trends

- ▶ Preference for activation/stimulation vs. soothing
- ▶ Unpredictable vs. predictable/regulating style
- ▶ Preparation for place in the world vs. relationships; 'real world' discipline vs. relational
- ▶ Frustration tolerance vs. facilitating
- ▶ Strong support for autonomy and independence
 - Especially from mother [are these *good* things?]

'Attachment' Relationships to Fathers differ from Mothers

- ▶ *Secure attachment to mother provides 'comfort when child is distressed'.*
- ▶ *Father provides 'security during monitored controlled excitement through sensitive and challenging support when child's exploratory system is aroused'.*
- ▶ *Besides...children form multiple attachments*

... and a new brain?

- ▶ Neurobiological changes seen on MRI at 2 weeks that are different than moms
- ▶ Highly involved fathers showed enhanced activity in regions of brain associated with:
 - 1) bond formation (not just with baby)
 - 2) auditory processing, especially with own baby's cry
 - 3) discriminating between crying/laughing

Risks to Fatherhood

- ▶ Unemployment/Guilt
- ▶ Inexperience
- ▶ Isolation
- ▶ Exclusion from child's life
 - [divorce, 'gatekeeping', child care/health/educational settings...'us']
- ▶ Work-family stress transcends gender, especially for men

Paternal engagement and infant mortality effects?

- ▶ Huge impact of prenatal involvement - particularly when encouraged by the mother (and us!)
 - *Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study*
 - 1,686 unmarried urban fathers showed prenatal involvement significantly and positively associated with paternal engagement @12,36 months (& overall measures of child wellbeing)
 - Partially explained by employment and cohabitation
 - Cabrera, N and Fagan, J, *Journal of Marriage and Family* 2008

Nursing perspectives beyond racial disparities...

- ▶ Perinatal nursing research U of Washington
 - Prenatal class attendance positively predisposes fathers to fathering, but most important impact is support mother feels from his presence
 - Attendance at birth, however, is more impactful than prenatal class preparation on men
 - Positively related to physical engagement and 'mentalization' of relationship with baby @3, 12 mos
 - And overall measures of child wellbeing...

Breast Feeding and Dads?

- ▶ Australian study of 76 couples 'Dads make a difference'
 - Mothers need support to stick with it
 - Fathers want to be involved, uncertain as to how (just like mothers)
 - A little timely help (from 'us') goes long way
 - Moms appreciated his encouragement, help, commitment
 - Dads felt closer to mom *and* baby when they had info, help learning the role and being an advocate
 - Rate of breast feeding at 6 months doubled when fathers attended 2-hour prenatal session focused on BF
- Tohotoa J, Maycock, B, International Breastfeeding Journal, 2009

Engaging Fathers in Programs

- ▶ Address maternal gatekeeping (domestic and institutional)-engage positively
- ▶ Address dad's needs (job, responsibility, his dad, peers)
- ▶ Ask explicitly
- ▶ Use local male talent, cultural competence
- ▶ Don't forget prevention (parental leave, breast feeding, depression screening)

Involvement Advice for Men

- ▶ Practice the routines (theirs)
- ▶ Appreciate what is unique to fathering *and* mothering
- ▶ Get more available emotionally
- ▶ Discuss regularly how it's going
- ▶ Date the wife
- ▶ Stay involved post-divorce/separation

...and Women

- ▶ Treat fathers not as 'helpers', but as partners
 - Gold standards differ; his is probably his father, yours...?
- ▶ Support and praise are money in the bank; criticism – not so much
- ▶ Mind the gatekeeping to promote coparenting

Risk Factors for Today's Families

- ▶ Relationship breakup
- ▶ Too little time spent together face-to-face
- ▶ Digital living
- ▶ Stress from economic conditions, mobility, work
- ▶ Expectations

*'There is not growing estrangement or a widening gender gap in what women and men want from each other. Most men and women are moving in the same direction in terms of their values...
...tensions between men and women today stem less from different aspirations than from the difficulties they face translating their ideals into practice.'*
-Coontz, 2009

Involved Fathering...
largest overlooked ingredient to relationship health and co-parenting children for lifelong well-being

"Involved Fathering"

- ▶ The behavior of the father (beyond insemination) that promotes and supports the well-being and development of the child and its family.
 - Need not be biological, married, etc.
