

The Role of the Father in the Family

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The Role of the Father in the Family

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If I was giving a talk to a group of students at university I would probably start it out with something like: "Once fathers were neglected but now they are the subject of intense research". Up to a point this is true. The research interest in fathers only started about 20 years ago. You can probably trace this back to a few important publications in the middle to early 70s.

One of the more critical books on fatherhood says that "...the contemporary literature reveals a new maturity. Fathers are now accorded serious attention in textbooks on socialisation. Theorists and researchers ponder the patterns of influence within the family rather than independent maternal and paternal effects, and parenting manuals are directed to a mixed readership of mothers and fathers." I think we should accept that with some caution. I don't think things have moved as much as we think they have. There is certainly more interest in fathers, but the research interest has not been there as strongly as I would have thought, given how it started in the early 70s.

What I want to do is just quickly go through an outline of certain areas of research into fathers. What is fathering about? What do fathers do?

Diversity of Fathering

With women we now accept diversity. That's a fairly important step in terms of recognising that people have different needs, different values and so on. We are not in quite the same ball park with regard to fathers and men. The range

includes the highly nurturant and involved, the "new father", "single fathers" and "traditional fathers" (in the sense of how we conceptualised the father before.)

I think that we've probably been a bit more critical of the traditional father who's in the paid workforce and doesn't share much in the domestic work at home.

I just read an article in the New Yorker where a new group of fathers are being very, very critical of the emphasis on this new age, more nurturant and involved fathering, saying:

"Hey, that's not what fathers were meant to be. They were meant to be disciplinarian, the person who was a little more aloof in the family." I notice that in the research as well.

There are also fathers who are non-custodial fathers within the context of the Family Court decision and they are a fairly important group. And I think it's also important to recognise that there is a group of disengaged physically and sexually abusive fathers in our society. We as men have not been as prepared to accept more general responsibility for some of the family violence and sexual assault, and to look at ways of improving that situation. There are also the cultural and age differences.

Most of the research has really been done on white middle class fathers, so we don't know a lot about the diversity of fatherhood. I am continually confronted by the diversity in fatherhood because of my involvement in running support and information groups for fathers and parents.

Beliefs and Feelings

There are also issues concerning beliefs and feelings about being a father. I think we sometimes make assumptions that fathers don't feel very much at all about being a father, and I'm continually surprised when people try to explain a lot of men's behaviour by a feeling of threat to their power. Some of that is true.

Also, though, some of what men do in relation to their children comes from very deep-seated feelings they have about their children which they have not been able to express. I see that sometimes, when men are threatened with not having contact with their

children. People are too willing to jump in and interpret it in that 'power' domain, rather than perhaps saying : "Wait. This guy might have very deep feelings about his children and that might help explain some of his behaviour."

Roles and Responsibilities

If I ask an open-ended question of a father: "What do you see as being your roles and responsibilities as a father?", about 60% of fathers will, within the first sentence, say something about breadwinning and earning income. I do a lot of research about men who spend a lot of time at home, and that's an issue for men whether they're at home because they're unemployed or home by choice. It's an issue they have to deal with in terms of their personal identity. I think it's still the case that men's identification still revolves around paid work more than it does around family life. The majority of men, though, say that they would prefer to spend more time with their children if they had the opportunity to do it, but I'll point out later that there are some real barriers for men to become more involved.

Involvement

Fathers can be competent care-givers. They can care for children - it might surprise you.

Fathers spend much less time than mothers in day-to-day care-giving, even when the mother is employed full-time. There is some evidence though that in younger families where you've got younger children fathers are doing more than they did in previous generations when you've got both parents employed, but it's still nowhere near 50/50.

They spend the greatest percentage of their time in play with their children. For a long time researchers thought that this was just play, in other words fathers weren't doing the 'real' things with their children, they weren't care-giving for them, they weren't changing nappies, they weren't bathing them and so on. They were just playing with them. There is now strong research evidence that shows that the style of play that fathers engage in with their children, which is often more of a rough and tumble, to-and-fro type play, is strongly related to

competence with peers in pre-school. It's early days yet for us to be concluding from this, but it seems that some of the things that fathers are doing with their children are having a greater impact than we previously thought.

Fathers spend more time in triadic than dyadic contexts (research jargon). They spend more time in a family context having 2 or 3 people around as well as the father, than in dyadic contexts, ie: a one-to-one relationship with a child, and when I run groups for fathers one of the things I suggest is that they might spend more time alone with individual children to develop those relationships. In 1% to 2% of families fathers share equally in day-to-day caregiving. In about 5% to 10% of families fathers are highly involved on a day-to-day basis. (I'm using very high standards for 'highly involved on a day-to-day basis'). Men are spending more time at home caring for children, but the shift in housework isn't as great. The "new and involved father" is becoming more common, but there is argument in the literature about "how common?", "what this indicates?" and so on. So some people have coined the phrase "the in-principle man". The principle they are in support of, but in practice, not at all.

One of things that we've found in our research is that men are very highly involved in making decisions in families, or being consulted with regard to making decisions, and that's something we hadn't picked up on earlier, because we were just asking 'Who does what?' The involvement in decision making is a critical predictor for their well-being, how they feel about themselves and how they feel about their family life, and that's true in those shared caregiving families where men are at home or caring for children as well. Those men get more irritated by the fact that they are not given the space to make the decisions. It is a fairly difficult thing for women in that situation to give a bit of space. But I don't for a moment agree with the recent emphasis on women as "gatekeepers". I think that tends to lay blame on women for not allowing men to get space. The difficulty that women have in sharing space, and giving up the idea that they should be the primary caregiving parent

all the time, is a real issue, but there is another side to it as well. Men can get over that barrier by having the techniques to do it.

Factors Associated With Men's Involvement

What factors have been associated with men being more highly involved in family life, and particularly caring for children?

Attending the birth, although now that the majority of men attend the birth that probably won't be shown in future research.

Having more information about child development and having had the opportunity to learn care-giving skills. There is research that shows that if men are given the opportunity to learn care-giving skills, say in a hospital situation, they will be more involved afterwards.

Having less stereotyped masculine self-concepts. Men who feel more confident with their identity, placing less emphasis on the social construction of masculinity, are also more likely to be involved.

Being employed in jobs that are less demanding. The work/family interface is a fairly critical factor here.

Having spouses who encourage involvement and consider their partners to be competent parents.

The partner relationship is fairly critical. I sometimes have people say to me "How did you become involved in this to begin with. I was not a new age guy. It was more the case that my wife encouraged and supported me).

There are factors during the pregnancy period that do facilitate men becoming more involved. Where people have gone through a process of trying to stay together as a couple eg attending doctor's appointments together and things that are psychologically orientated towards having a baby, it's in those families that you find fathers are more highly involved. Being a researcher, I add a caution that because these studies are really not great longitudinal studies, it really does not allow us to address the question of cause and effect. There may be other factors causing this. But at least at the moment we have a set of relationships that we think might be able to direct social policy.

Benefits of Involvement

One of the things that comes through very clearly in the research is that there are enormous benefits for men themselves in getting involved with their children. Shifting the emphasis towards fathers being highly involved is not going to create 'super kids'. There are obviously some positive processes going on when you have two parents who are actively involved and care, but if I had to take a very critical review of all the work that's been done I think that the benefits are greater for fathers than anybody else. They get a greater sense of satisfaction, a greater sense of contribution and stronger relationships with their children. It's the increased depth of the relationship with their children that turns out to be more critical than anything else. Obviously there are benefits for women as well, but when it's all filtered through it's for fathers more than anything else.

Practices and Policies

I think it's necessary to establish a set of working principles, and that's what I've done with my research. Sometimes I get challenged by people who say "Some of what you say is not supported by research" And I have to say "That's true because the research hasn't been done". What I've rather done is to start out with a set of basic 'human being' principles, primarily around rights and responsibilities for both mothers and fathers to share in the nurturing, as well as the things that go on outside the home. The basis of that is that the well-being of mothers, fathers, children and employers in society would be enhanced by a better balance between paid work and family life for fathers, and there is a need to improve the parenting opportunities for fathers.

The barriers to fathers becoming more involved are more significant than we sometimes think. The services that people provide for parents are not particularly father-friendly. Practices and policies are based on traditional assumptions, and not based on the presumption of shared responsibility.

Changes are needed:

Firstly, recognise the diversity. Give more attention to father's feelings, his needs for support and support groups for men. Once you start that process men will talk, will share feelings and will feel comfortable. It's a matter of providing a forum for that.

Evaluate the arguments about time spent with children. I believe that quantity time is important to get quality time. Having the time is critical, and when I work with men I often go through how they use their time, and encourage them to put greater priority both on time with their children and partner time.

Develop family-enhancing employment policies.

Provide parent-education programs for fathers.

Give more attention to couple-relationships. This is fairly critical in negotiating all of these changes.

Critically evaluate the approaches to services.

And finally, more research is needed.

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