

## Fathers in Families

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Fathers are very important in the developmental health and well being of their children. Traditionally they have been primarily highlighted in their breadwinning role. While this remains an important role, and a significant part of fathering identity which men and their families value highly, it is generally agreed in this day and age that a fathers' role is much broader than this. Indeed, the concept of the *new nurturant* father has emerged as an ideal in western culture. This reflects broader societal change in role expectations for women as well as increasing knowledge about the ways in which paternal influences contribute to children's developmental wellbeing. There is also plenty of evidence to suggest that if they want to be centrally involved in parenting, fathers are just as competent in providing warmth, nurturance, and close attachments for their children as are mothers.

Children's development is influenced by the quantity and quality of father involvement in their care, across all stages of development. Fathers' positive influence comes not only through their interactions with their children, in care situations, in play, in skill teaching and training, but most importantly through the attachments which develop between fathers and children. These attachments give great satisfaction to fathers as well as to the children, and they contribute to a father's sense of belonging, competence, self esteem and confidence.

Fathers have very high cultural value in the eyes of children. They are greatly valued by children as playmates, companions, carers, and as significant role models. Children with involved, warm,

nurturing fathers are happier, more secure and well adjusted and do better at school. Fathers need to know and understand this fact. Surprisingly they often do not, and continue to leave the bulk of child rearing to mothers.

In addition to the significance of father-child bonds, there are beneficial effects on mother-father relationships and on the whole family system when fathers are highly participatory. Fathers give emotional as well as concrete/physical support to the mother (Belsky, 1984), and this contributes to good mothering and harmonious family relationships. Fathers are part of the parental team and in this partnership they add security, stability and shared responsibility for their children's development.

### Advantages of father involvement

Research has clearly shown that high levels of father involvement with their children are associated with a range of significant and highly desirable individual and community outcomes (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). These include: better psychosocial adjustment in children; higher levels of cognitive and social competence; increased social responsibility (sociability with others, carrying out responsibilities, moral values); capacity for empathy; greater self-control, self-esteem, and life skills; more positive child-father and adolescent-father relationships; more prosocial sibling interactions; higher social maturity, fewer school adjustment difficulties, better academic progress, and enhanced occupational achievement in adulthood (Pleck, 1997). The consequences for fathers of positive involvement are

also related to a range of positive psychosocial outcomes and enhanced well-being for themselves.

The significance of father involvement (FI) for the family goes well beyond that of sharing the tasks of child-care. Ehrenberg and her colleagues (Ehrenberg, Gearing-Small, Hunter, & Small, 2001) showed that psychological and social aspects of sharing parenting were associated with marital happiness, parental competence, and closeness to children rather than to the division of tasks. However, despite the wealth of evidence supporting the significant benefits of FI, unlike mother involvement, father involvement remains a matter of choice rather than being considered obligatory; consequently there is very wide variation between fathers in both degree of involvement, and in which aspects of care they participate in.

### Unique paternal style

Fathers are highly valued “playmates” for children. It is established that fathers are much more likely to engage in active, playful physical leisure related relationships with their children rather than in the more intimate, emotional, and nurturing domains; and that fathers’ special and unique play style (e.g., “rough housing”) contributes to children’s attachment security (Newland, Coyl, & Freeman, 2008). Fathers tend to emphasize physical activities such as the sharing and teaching of practical skills, developing competence for example in sport, or academic pursuits, i.e. ‘hands on’ interactions. Mothers by contrast are often the communicators and the partners in more social and emotionally based interactions. This is not to say that this does not occur with fathers, nor that they are not able to successfully provide such input, it is just that mothers seem to be the preferred recipients of confidences and more often asked about social problem solving issues (Prior et al. 2000).

### Dimensions of fathering

It is not just the principle of involved fathering which is important but the ways in which this happens. Researchers of fathering describe a variety of ways in which fathers impact on the lives of their children (Lamb, Pleck, & Levine, 1987). They need to be both available and *accessible*: i.e. to be around when their children are there and responsive to their overtures and to their needs. They also need to be *engaged*: i.e. to listen to, and interact with children, to pay attention to their needs and their interests, and to be actively doing things with them. It is also very valuable for fathers and children if fathers spend some regular time caring for their children alone (Russell, 1982); such time is qualitatively different from time children and fathers are together when the mother is also present. This dimension of fathering involves a deeper level of involvement; the notion that fathers are able to make decisions about their children’s well being, and to share tasks with mothers as equally competent partners, and it may be particularly significant for father-child bonding. Yet many fathers spend minimal time alone with their children, and, indeed, this type of paternal care is still commonly referred to as “babysitting” (Wilson, 2003). Australian Bureau of Statistics data indicated that fulltime employed fathers spend, on average, 7% of their parenting time alone with their children, compared with 74% in the company of their wives/partners (Craig, 2002).

Another dimension of fathering is conceptualized by Lamb et al (1987) as *responsibility*, i.e. thinking, planning, organizing, managing child needs even if the parent is not physically present with the child at the time; for example, organizing a dental visit, arranging a play date, selecting and purchasing toys, or planning a school consultation. While this responsibility aspect of child rearing is managed by fathers in collaboration with the mother in some families, in general it remains primarily (or even totally) the mother’s role. These “behind the scenes” tasks

are frequently invisible to children, who focus on and value the accessibility of, and interaction with, their fathers. As a consequence of that invisibility, the responsibility dimension of involvement is not highly valued by many fathers (Wilson, 2003). Nevertheless, decisions made and actions taken in this arena are vitally influential in shaping a child's environment and developmental experiences.

Although in all of the described aspects of involvement, and despite an increase in father's availability to children, both research and everyday experience shows that Australian fathers remain less involved than mothers (Craig, 2006). Low father involvement is especially notable in the responsibility dimension, where the father is often seen as an "assistant" parent, with the mother having overall responsibility and sometimes "delegating" tasks to him.

### **Quantity and quality of fathering**

While accepting evidence for the breadth of contributions of fathers, economists and policy makers are most likely to ask the question 'how much fathering', and how much time do fathers need to devote to child caring for it to make a successful and acceptable contribution to the lives of families and communities? Responses to such questions inevitably must include the fact that quality as well as quantity of time is important. Both are necessary and the optimum is for father involvement to be high in both.

Recent research in fathering has had a greater focus on *positive* quality of involvement rather than simply on availability of father-time to children. Lamb (1997) argued that a close father-child relationship requires fathers to spend more than a small amount of time interacting with their children, to develop sensitivity to their characteristics and their needs, and to learn skills and confidence in parenting. Mere hours will not provide what is needed for optimum well-being. There are differing views regarding the associations between quantity and quality, where some argue that they

can be independent, some that more time leads to higher quality, and some warning that high quantity parenting can be worse if it is critical, negative and domineering. Others claim that it is predominantly the emotional domain of parenting which has beneficial effects (Deutsch, Servis, & Payne, 2001) independent of time applied. In general it is the characteristics of the involvement or investment which are critical, and these may not always depend on time, but rather more on what fathers actually do with and for their children (Kernis, Brown, & Brody, 2000). It is also important to note the evidence that father absence in a family can have a deleterious effect on children's development. Children in single parent (usually mother only) families are vulnerable to more adjustment problems and poorer academic outcomes (Sawyer et al 2001).

Reference to the burgeoning literature on father involvement, its nature, and effects on developmental outcomes provides a level of evidence to support re-thinking and re-structuring work and family systems to foster greater father involvement. However, contemporary culture still prioritizes fathers' role as breadwinner over other fathering roles; yet mothers are also breadwinners and able to combine that role with their traditional family responsibilities. Greater support for balanced work-family roles for both mothers and fathers is needed for the overall wellbeing of families, as well as for the benefit of father-child relationships and optimal child developmental outcomes.

### **Contemporary progress?**

Even though more than 40% of mothers are at home with the children, and still do the bulk of the caring, there is evidence that expectations for fathering involvement have been changing. Since the 1960s in Australia, as well as in the US, (Pleck, 1997), there has been a gradual move towards more direct involvement by fathers in their children's upbringing. While this has not resulted in a significant change in terms

of the proportional amount of time fathers spend caring for their children compared with mothers, self reported hours of fathering involvement have increased somewhat, (Bittman, 1998), and there is a small but growing increase in role sharing and role reversal (where father is the primary carer) in child rearing. Some fathers 'begin at the beginning', and join their wives in pre-birth classes, and many attend the birth of their baby. Fathers are now more conscious of concepts and behaviours related to the importance of 'bonding' with their infant, and some take paternal leave to be involved in at least the early caring and supporting experience with a new born.

Thus it is now acknowledged, although not enough practiced, that the father role extends beyond that of 'breadwinner' or primary economic support. Changes have also been driven, at least in part, by the economic imperative brought about by new relationships between work and family, changes in mothers' and fathers' work patterns, and the influence of growth in an increasingly well educated middle class with high levels of influence on social mores and values. Nevertheless, Pleck (1997) has cautioned that the "new father" may be a cultural myth created by the media, movies, and TV commercials that distorts the fact that mothers are still the major providers of child care and custodians of children's well being. Hence FI t needs to be considered in terms of a complex mix of behaviours, contexts, and outcomes. The various aspects of fathering noted above make significant contributions to social and psychological capital in families, including the well being of children, in addition to the financial support that they traditionally provide.

*What draws fathers toward more involvement with their families?*

Influences on father involvement which have been identified as important include: the mother's role in trusting and encouraging fathers to take on significant fathering roles, foster-

ing father responsibility and providing "father alone" caring opportunities; the hours of work for both parents:- where the mother works substantial hours fathers are more likely to take on responsibilities, but where the father works long hours involvement may be minimal; social class effects with educated middle class fathers overall more likely to be involved than traditional working class parents (or to endorse its importance); fathers' beliefs about how competent and effective they are in the role (feeling successful and efficacious in their parenting role is highly motivating for fathers); and fathers' feelings of closeness to their children and enjoyment of their company. These latter factors are helpful in understanding some of the psychological variables which affect fathers' thoughts and attitudes about their fathering roles and responsibilities, and in developing strategies for increasing involvement in ways which will benefit both child and parents.

## **Strategies for increasing FI**

In order to foster cultural change for the better health and functioning of families, there is great need for the dissemination of easily accessible, evidence-based information regarding the importance and value of father involvement. Fathers and mothers alike need to be educated about the fact that paternal involvement can be beneficial to children across all domains of development, socialization, learning, and well-being. Mothers could learn to provide more regular opportunities for fathers to take on father-alone care, which in turn can increase paternal confidence and sense of efficacy. To facilitate greater father involvement, mothers need to expect fathers to be responsible, so, for many mothers, their own attitudes and behaviours may need to change.

In addition, parent education programs specifically targeting fathers are required to foster the skills and confidence men need and want for their range of fathering roles. Currently,

parenting education and family services are not as “father-friendly” as they need to be to increase men’s participation in them to any significant level (Fletcher, Fairbairn, & Pascoe, 2004); this should be remedied.

On a broader scale, “family friendly” work policies and practices is a critical issue for fathers as well as mothers and of course for employers (most of whom are fathers themselves). Progress has been at a snail like pace; and close scrutiny of what is happening in the average business environment suggests great ambivalence about family friendly policies and practices to enhance father involvement, and at worst, hindrance and blocking of progress in this direction. Both mothers and fathers continue to fear that their career paths will be compromised if they place too much emphasis on their parenting needs and responsibilities. A culture change is critical to increase the rate of progress in the world of work towards the greater health and well-being of parents and of children.

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