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The Father's Role

Our experts discuss how fathers help their children grow.

by Dr. Charles Flatter, Dr. James M. Herzog, Dr. Phyllis Tyson and Katherine Ross

The next few Through the Years articles will cover the crucial impact of family relationships on child development. As a child grows, his interactions with family members shape his personality and create the basis for the ways in which he will relate to other important people in his life. We begin with the role of fathers.

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BIRTH TO TWO

By James M. Herzog, M.D.

Many fathers assume that their role in a child's development doesn't begin until the child is in his second year. Once a child is no longer a newborn and can walk, "talk," and play in a more interactive way, a father will believe that he begins to matter to the child. Before then, he may think that the mother is the one truly significant parent. He may help her take care of the baby but won't view himself as being crucial to the job.

My point of view is quite different. I believe that the father is central to a baby's life from day one. Of course, child specialists haven't always believed this, but much has changed over the last 25 years.

A Different World

In the early 1970s, women in our society began to redefine the role of wife and mother. Increasing numbers of mothers went into the workplace, and, as a result, some husbands began assuming a greater share of parenting responsibilities.

Over time, some experts in child development observed that many husbands were quite adept at nurturing. The experts also noted that men's way of being with and relating to children was not like women's. It seemed as if fathering were a different phenomenon from mothering.

Overall, the research tells us two things. First, fathers play a pivotal role in the lives of infants and children; second, what they offer to their children is specific to fathers as males and is distinct from what mothers offer. In fact, studies indicate that as early as three months of age, a baby has discerned the fact that he has both a mother and a father. Even more, he's already developed notions of himself-with-father and himself-with-mother.

Learning to Tune In

During the first few months after giving birth, most women become attuned to their baby's well-being, perhaps to the extent of considering the infant and themselves to be a single entity.

Where does this special attunement come from? For nine months, while the baby was in his mother's uterus, his and her biological systems functioned together. After birth, especially if the mother is breast-feeding her child, the two remain physiologically linked. Of course, it's also true that a mother knows and anticipates her baby's needs because she is probably his main caregiver. It's her job to be attuned to what goes on inside the baby.

What does the father's job entail? Because he is not physically linked in the same way as the mother and is probably less involved in the baby's care, the father often has a unique perspective. He can see the baby not only as an extension of the mother but as an individual. The father is aware that the mother-infant pair is made up of two distinct people. His job is to remember this even when the mother loses sight of it.

While this job may seem somewhat lesser than the mother's, it actually has an enormous impact on the baby's growing self-awareness. When an infant is treated as a separate entity, it helps him start to develop a sense of self and other. Over the following months, it allows him to understand that he has a life apart from his mother. Most important, it pushes him toward the realization that he exists even when she is absent.

Interestingly, the father's relative lack of attunement is also an advantage for the child because it encourages her to develop an interactive way of relating. Since the father may not anticipate her needs as promptly as the mother, the child must learn how to make them known. For his part, the father has to become something of a detective. Why is his three-month-old so fussy? he must ask himself. Is she hungry, wet, or bored? The father must pay close attention to the baby and become a resourceful theorist. (Of course, mothers have to do this, too, but because they usually spend so much more time with the infant, they have more past experience to draw upon.) With practice, the baby and the father develop their own distinctive way of relating to each other.

A Fatherly Fashion

By the time a baby is about four months old, the father will have developed his own styles of play and caregiving. Many men tend to relate to children in a less soothing way than mothers do and to expect that children match their mood and tempo.

Probably because of a rudimentary wish to please and to be like their fathers, boy babies tend to respond to their fathers' intensity in a fairly compliant way. If Dad makes a scary monster face during a game of peekaboo, for example, a son will tend not to object even if he's a little frightened. A girl baby does not identify with her father in the same way, so she's less likely to accept his overtures solely on his terms. Instead, she may let him use a monster face once or twice, but no more than that.

Babies of both sexes have interesting experiences with their fathers, even in a simple game of peekaboo. They become excited quickly; then the excitement fades just as rapidly as it peaked. What do infants and toddlers learn from these experiences? First, they learn the ability to manage intense feelings; second, they discover a capacity to shift emotional gears, to move from a high-key mood to a low-key one. This gives them the crucial ability to control shifting states of feelings and helps them develop a sense of competence and mastery.

Turning to Dad

Between the ages of 14 and 17 months, a boy's need to identify with his male parent intensifies. He will often seek closer contact with his father and turn to him rather than to his mother for emotional refueling. A girl of this age is also likely to turn to her father, increasing her efforts to show him how to relate to her. What this suggests is that for each sex, a father's presence is important as a way of defining their masculinity or femininity.

Important as the father's role is, it doesn't exist in a vacuum. The way that a man relates to his son or daughter reflects the way in which he relates to his wife. The ongoing strength and intimacy of the parental relationship, which includes an ability to manage emotions like love, hate, and hurt feelings, allows a man to participate in the rearing of his children in a meaningful way. And clearly, this is to the children's advantage.

Take-Away Tips

- From day one, a father has a role in his infant's life; he must help the baby develop a notion of herself as separate and distinct from her mother.

- In the second year, babies turn to fathers for emotional refueling; the father's presence helps babies define themselves as masculine or feminine. *K.R.*
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TWO TO FIVE

By Charles Flatter, Ed.D.

When my oldest child was small, we used to read the nationally syndicated comic strip *Dagwood and Blondie*, which was about the Bumsteads, a typical suburban family. The funniest episodes always seemed to involve the times when Dagwood, the father and breadwinner, had to take care of the children. The first thing he'd do as parent-in-residence was put on his wife Blondie's apron. It was as if, by wearing something that belonged to her, he was symbolically becoming her. For the Bumsteads, as for most couples during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s in the United States, being the parent meant being the mother.

Today we know better. Studies have shown the importance of gender roles in shaping our individual and collective consciousnesses, and we are now aware of the critical role fathers play throughout a child's development. Because he is male and because he is the other parent—the child's other major adult reference point—the father expands the child's range of experience and broadens his world view.

Despite all the changes that have taken place in the last few decades, two facts remain: First, mothers are still the primary caretakers of preschool boys and girls and, second, most baby-sitters and day-care providers are women. This means that young children are still raised in an environment that is almost exclusively female. It may also mean that the father is the only male the child has contact with on a regular basis.

Challenging the Child

The problem with this is that it gives a girl or boy an incomplete notion of what the world is about. The male parent, with his different ways of relating and playing, rounds out a child's sense of the world. He demonstrates that human society is made up of two genders, each with distinct styles of dress, thought, and behavior.

For example, fathers typically have a rough-and-tumble style of playing, which has great importance for a child. Physically invigorating and emotionally charged, such play provides girls and boys with the sort of challenge they may not get from any other source. The way they learn to respond to this sort of challenge will serve them well later in life.

Also of enormous importance is that the father's approach to problem-solving may be different from the mother's. When a four-year-old assembles a puzzle with her father, or watches him cook, fix a flat tire, shop for groceries, or mediate a conflict between siblings, she has the advantage of seeing how an adult other than her mother handles things. If one parent's approach to a task is more analytic and the other's is more emotional—if, say, the mother follows the instructions as she assembles a toy while the father does such things intuitively, or vice versa—the child gets a more complete picture of the variety of ways in which people do things. He also understands that there is almost always more than one way to approach a problem.

Help With Identity

Starting at the age of four or five, as boys begin to develop a clear sense of themselves as males, the relationship with their father becomes central. Identifying with the father allows a boy to shore up his confidence in his maleness. When his father pays close attention to his accomplishments, and supports and encourages his emotional development, a boy feels cared for by the person whom he most wishes to emulate.

Through a girl's relationship with her male parent, she becomes aware of herself as female and may become quite involved with her father. Some four- and five-year-old girls may act flirtatiously with their fathers; others may want to spend more time than they have before in activities with their fathers. Typically, girls of

this age become resentful of their mothers; they're jealous of the special, exclusive relationship that they know full well exists between mothers and fathers.

If it was ever true that father was simply an alternative to mother, basically incompetent with children and not especially important to their development, it is certainly no longer true. For both girls and boys, having an involved, caring father helps them develop all sides of themselves. A father needn't be like a mother; his differences are valuable. More than anything, his involvement is what's crucial. When a father is really there for his children, he brings to parenting his own unique way of seeing and behaving in the world and provides his daughters and sons with an enhanced understanding of themselves and the world around them.

Take-Away Tips

- A small child's world consists mostly of women (his mother and caregivers); the male parent is important because he gives the child a more complete picture of the larger environment.
- By age four or five, girls turn to their fathers and away from their mothers; this helps them define themselves as female. Boys of this age turn to their fathers as a way of defining their masculinity. *K.R.*

SIX TO ELEVEN

By Phyllis Tyson, Ph.D.

As major cognitive changes occur around the age of six or seven, children begin to see their fathers more objectively. In the preschool years youngsters tend to idealize their father, but now they have a greater capacity to regard him as a person in his own right, who is separate from their feelings about him.

A good father is crucial to a school-age child's development—and every bit as important as a good mother. Largely as a result of his physical presence and emotional support, gender identity becomes consolidated for both boys and girls during this period, and aggressive impulses are made more manageable. Without him, children of both sexes are likely to enter adolescence and adulthood without resolving these key psychological issues.

Of course it will come as no surprise to learn that for a boy, the father is the key role model. Through shared activities and play in which his competence and assertiveness are affirmed, a boy strengthens his sense of maleness. A good father can provide a model of the role that a man plays in both family and society. An eight-year-old boy can learn, for example, that being manly doesn't mean that you have to be a fireman, an astronaut, or a cowboy, or that being strong and good isn't for superheroes only. Contact with his father can teach him that being a "real" man means having a capacity for tenderness as well as toughness.

For a girl, the father is the central masculine figure, who is much beloved to her. From now on, she will compare all significant males with her father in one way or another. Not only does his appreciation of her feminine qualities reinforce her sense of herself as a girl, it also shores up her overall self-esteem. When a seven-year-old girl calls out, "Daddy, look at me!" and then turns a cartwheel, you can be fairly sure that she craves not only his attention but his admiration. And, of course, the good father always gives it.

The Importance of Being Dad

Because of her father, a girl is more able to separate from mother and establish herself as an autonomous person. During the early school-age years, the girl is experiencing some strong regressive longings for the close mother-child relationship of not so long ago; fortunately, her attachment to her father helps her resist the seductive pull back to an earlier stage.

In our culture the father has traditionally given his children a sense of the moral order that exists in the world outside the family. His role has been to make clear that rules exist in the larger social order and that parents, just like their children, are obliged to follow them. The mother's traditional domain has been to teach values that have an interpersonal theme: "Speak kindly to your grandmother," "Don't be selfish with your toys," and "Take care of your younger brother," among others.

Even though a great deal has changed in male-female roles, some things haven't. Whether a mother is employed outside the home or not, she is almost always the children's primary caregiver, and so the teaching of interpersonal issues continues to be central to her parenting. Of course, in some families there is a less rigid division of parental tasks. Mothers can teach both abstract values and personal skills. Fathers, meanwhile, can teach personal issues; at the same time, they can help girls and boys to learn how to function in the world.

Lessons About Aggression

A crucial lesson that children learn from their fathers involves aggression; how to use this powerful force in a positive way and how to contain it. From infancy onward, through their vigorous play with their fathers, boys and girls learn to experience intense emotion and then to calm themselves down. This early training in self-regulation comes in handy when children have to deal with strong negative feelings, such as anger and frustration. Are they overwhelmed by their own aggressive impulses, or can they master them? Can aggression exist in good balance with other emotions, such as love and nurturance, or does it take over?

If fathers have resolved these issues for themselves, children will be better able to use their own aggression to their advantage, channeling it into self-assertion rather than destruction or self-destruction. A girl whose father's aggression is under control will form the basis now for learning to have positive feelings about the male sex in general. If he is strong and supportive, she is more likely to make healthy attachments in later life.

When the father demonstrates that his aggression is safely under control, his son will be far more likely to have good relationships with women later on. He'll know that good relationships are based on mutual interests and respect rather than power or fear.

When girls reach 10 or 11 years of age, fathers tend to become less like Prince Charming and more like real men; for boys fathers (rather than fictional heroes) become role models. For both sexes, the father holds a position of unparalleled importance. This is true not just during childhood but through all of adult life.

Take-Away Tips

- School-age girls idealize their fathers; having a father's admiration is crucial for a daughter's growing sense of herself as female.
- A father can teach a boy that being a "real" man doesn't mean being a superhero but being involved with and caring about other people.
- Children now learn from their fathers how to control aggression. By watching him deal with his own in a positive way, they can acquire inner controls. *K.R.*

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