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Working with Fathers...

Supporting the Involved Father: What's a Mother to Do?



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Are mothers the gate-keepers of father involvement?

Power issues

When I offered a college class titled *Fathering* during the Summer of 1984 I wasn't sure who would come. Thirteen female graduate students registered for the class and I realized that women were even more interested and invested in understanding the changing role of fathers than men. This year I had the opportunity to visit a couple of parent groups as a guest speaker talking about the changing role of the father. In both classes the women explained why their husbands couldn't make it. They were eager to hear a male perspective on the father's role and also to share some of their own experiences and feelings related to their husbands' involvement. I was struck by both the intensity and ambivalence of their feelings as well as the diversity of family situations. The role of the involved father has perhaps been oversold as a simple and easy answer to improving family life. The women's role in supporting her husband in becoming an involved father is critical, but how much responsibility should women take? The purpose of this article is to explore a mother's role in supporting the myth and reality of the involved father. In addition, the article will offer some specific exercises for helping mothers to understand family dynamics related to father involvement.

Parenting magazines in recent years have offered advice to mothers on how to get men more involved in family life. Mothers in dual-career families are often overburdened working the "second shift" (Hochschild; 1989) as they take responsibility for the majority of child care and household tasks in addition to a job outside the home. Fathers in all family contexts are expected to be more involved with their children than their own fathers were. Mothers are faced with the task of supporting and often mediating this involvement. Some of the strategies that are suggested include: Praising husbands when they help; structuring child care tasks so that the men will feel successful; and lowering your standards of how a task is done. These suggestions, while they may have some merit, seem to make the assumption that mother is the primary parent and fathers can be trained as "assistant parents" to help out with the children and housework. The negotiation of parenting and family responsibilities in families in the 1990s is a real challenge. This negotiation needs to take place on an adult to adult level. Treating men like children seems to be misguided advice. However, some women may be reluctant to give up the home manager role when it may be the only domain where they have real power based on knowledge and skills they have developed in caring for children and managing family life. This can lead women to playing a gate-keeping function by setting standards and parameters for father involvement.

The research in recent years has painted a very complex picture of the sexual politics of mothering and fathering. The diversity of family structures and work arrangements provides a complex background for understanding how the role of the new father is enacted. Backett (1987), in her study of the negotiation of fatherhood describes the hidden power of women in maintaining control over the family realm, especially child-rearing. She suggests that mothers are retaining their power by accepting minimal efforts (e.g., playing with children and being a source of pleasure) on the part of their spouses as proof of involved fatherhood. If men are willing and able to do things for children when necessary



**Power shifts may
create more conflict
in the short run**

and have demonstrated this on previous occasions they are considered involved fathers. The discrepancies that appear between the conduct and culture of involved fatherhood (LaRossa, 1988) are explained away by a relativistic view of the family power dynamics as the 'fairest solution possible in the prevailing circumstances.' Backett's research also suggests that women may have taken on the additional burden of creating the appearances of an egalitarian family where in reality, men have choices about when and how to be involved and women retain ultimate responsibility.

Lamb, Pleck and Levine (1987) also describe the power imbalances that may occur as men shift into the role of a more involved parent. Research by Baruch and Barnett (1988) indicates that increased father involvement creates more conflict between spouses in regard to child-rearing. The reluctance of women to share their family power seems to fade in some families as the negotiation process becomes more open and honest. This shift in power may also have to be accompanied by mother's increase of power outside the home. The negotiation process is complex and in many families the context keeps changing as children grow and jobs change. The pragmatic issues of who is taking responsibility for family tasks has to be considered in light of the family power balance. The research cited above suggests that integrating an involved father into many family systems requires great effort and will likely lead to more conflict about child-rearing and disequilibrium of current power balances. Mothers often play a gate-keeping function and must be willing to undertake the long, perhaps unending process of negotiation to reap the actual benefits of the involved father role. Otherwise, the involved father role may be just another family myth that protects men from accepting greater responsibility for children.

Ideas for Practice

How can family educators assist parents (in this case, mothers) to manage the mine field of issues that arise around supporting the new involved father as an image and as a reality? The following set of exercises may be helpful in exploring some of the feelings of mothers and some of the issues related to sexual politics and parenting. They could be presented together or as separate exercises. The two exercises address the images or ideals that have been developed around the role of father and the barriers that men face when they assume a more involved father role. A list of supportive strategies for women to discuss and consider is also provided.

**Exercise 1: Images and
Assumptions about
Fathers**

See handout page 66.

The purpose of this exercise is to examine the ideal image of the involved father as well as some characteristics that are undesirable for men as fathers. This exercise may help mothers to understand what their expectations are and where they come from.

Unrealistically high or low expectations about the role of father can be problematic. Our culture through the media has painted a positive picture of involved fatherhood without looking at the real costs. Some of the questions that might be asked while processing this exercise are:

1. Where do your expectations come from?
2. Do you think your ideal image is realistic for most families? For your family?
3. Does your spouse have a similar ideal image of the involved father?
4. How does your role as mother have to change to accommodate this image?

Exercise 2: Barriers that Impede Involved Fathering

Ask the mothers to list both the internal and external barriers that appear to keep men from taking a more active role in parenting. These can be listed on two sheets of paper and reviewed to see how they fit with some of the research evidence about barriers. For example, the time spent at work is listed by fathers as the major source of interference with their role as active fathers (Johnson & Palm, 1992). Some of the research evidence (See Catalyst Staff, 1988) suggests that men face a number of barriers if they try to change work behavior to accommodate the involved father role. It may be harder for mothers to identify the internal barriers that men face. The following list might be helpful as a summary of some of the internal barriers that appear to keep men in less involved father roles. The purpose of analyzing barriers is to understand some of the real limits that men face, but the discussion should move beyond understanding to how to stretch or move around these limits.

Male Internal Issues that are Barriers

- Men are socialized away from relationships to be independent and focus on self-achievement.
- Men are not prepared for parenthood with skills and knowledge related to child-rearing but need to appear competent and in control.
- Men face conflicts between the traditional father role they grew up with and new nurturant role.
- Men have some confusion about how to maintain a sense of masculinity in new father role.
- Men may fear the commitment of time and self that is necessary for a close father-child relationship.
- Most men find it easier to articulate new attitudes about involved fathering than to learn new behavior patterns.
- Men have difficulty seeking support and connecting with other men about parenting because of homophobic attitudes and feelings of incompetence.

Supportive Strategies for Mothers

The following list of ideas is proposed as a general set of strategies. It is important to approach men as adults who need encouragement and support in learning the knowledge, skills and confidence to be an involved father. Mothers should not discount their own knowledge and expertise, but must give men safe space to make mistakes and learn about parenting. Men should be encouraged to get support from other men instead of depending upon their spouse as their only source of support. Ask mothers to add their own ideas and strategies to this list.

What Can Mothers Do to Support Involved Fathering

- Provide space and time for men to take responsibility for children without playing the expert role or gate-keeper role.
- Expect differences in styles of parenting and appreciate the differences you both have that meet your child's needs.
- Expect more tensions and conflicts as you both negotiate new roles and responsibilities.
- Encourage your spouse to learn more about child development and behavior in ways that match his learning style.
- Encourage your partner to talk with other men about parenting issues.
- Enjoy the benefits of watching your partner learn from and with your child.

Summary

The negotiation of power and responsibility requires courage, insight, love between spouses and persistence.

It is critical for couples to be realistic about the expectations and the hard work that is involved in negotiating parenting responsibilities in families. While there are many benefits of involved fathering to both men and women, the process to achieve these benefits will not be easy or pleasant. It is important to let mothers vent some of their frustrations and fears without falling into the trap of husband-bashing. It may help to have a male guest speaker come to class to listen to the complaints and share some of the struggles that men face as they try to adapt to new expectations and grow into the involved father role. The sexual politics of parenting reminds us that focusing on greater father involvement requires a clear and realistic view of family systems. The negotiation of power and responsibility requires courage, insight, love between spouses, and persistence. The benefits can be worth the risks and the costs as families grow closer and more resilient.

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Images and Assumptions about Fathers

We create ideal images about fathers based on our experiences with men. The purpose of this exercise is to examine some of the important sources of our current images and to articulate some of the important expectations that we have for fathers in the 1990s. Focus on 2-3 different sources that you feel have been most influential on your current ideal images and expectations for fathers.

Own Fathers (or Father Figures)

Strengths

Undesirable Characteristics

Spouse/Self
Strengths

Undesirable Characteristics

TV Fathers (Can identify specific characters)

Strengths

Undesirable Characteristics

Male Friends Who are Fathers

Strengths

Undesirable Characteristics

Your Composite Image of the Ideal Father in 1990s

What are your expectations for men in their role as fathers?



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