

Life WITH Father

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On a recent Saturday afternoon, along with a good friend and his two children, I took my two boys for a walk in the forest. It was one of those beautiful late fall days we had this year and the trail was filled with people and dogs. Over and over again, either through direct comment or smiles that said, "Isn't that cute, the daddies are with their kids," the fact that we were men with our children was noted. It struck me that, even today, when it is more common to see fathers with children it is still perceived as a cute anomaly.

The fact is that not only is it endearing to see a dad with his kids, it is essential to the child's development. So much has been made of fathers' absence. What about father presence? It is true that there are many types of families. There are truly absent dads—men that may never step up to their responsibility of fathering. But that is only part of the father picture. There are also stay at home dads, custodial and non-custodial dads, and fathers whose work keeps them from home much of the time. How helpful is it to focus solely on the negativity of father absence? Wouldn't we rather share information that supports increased levels of father involvement?

There is a wealth of research that we should be using to educate men about the power of their *presence* in their children's lives. Here we will focus on those dads that are somewhere in the picture but spend most of their time on the sidelines.

- In one study, preschool age children whose fathers were responsible for 40% or more of the family's child care tasks had higher scores on assessments of cognitive development, had more of a sense of mastery over their environments, and exhibited more empathy than those children whose fathers were less involved.
- Higher levels of father involvement in activities with their children, such as eating meals together, going on outings, and helping with homework are associated with fewer behavior problems, higher levels of sociability, and a high level of school performance among children and adolescents.
- Several studies have documented a positive relationship between the provision of child support and the well being of school age children.

So if father presence holds so much benefit for the child, what holds fathers back? There are many cultural, familial, financial, and personal reasons that fathers may be less involved. Initially we must understand that the importance of father presence is new information. When I have looked for advice from my father, lamenting about the difficulties of parenting young children, he laughs saying that he never really was that involved in day-to-day parenting. For some men this lack of role modeling has led to a lack of confidence in their role as father as well as embarrassment about their difficulty mastering this role. Additionally, women are culturally expected to be enthusiastic about parenting and tend to be more comfortable in the world of relationships. This can lead to a dynamic within families that further pushes mother to the foreground and father to the background. There are also financial issues at play here. Family

expectations or workplace cultures may set demands on fathers that limit or even prohibit their involvement with their children. For example fathers may find it impossible to leave work to run their child to the doctor or volunteer in their classroom.

So what can we do?

Informing and motivating fathers is a public health issue. Father involvement has been seen to be particularly important in the first year of life. There are programs in hospital maternity units across the country that works to teach men about the importance of their presence. Early childhood education programs such as Head Start have done a wonderful job of making father involvement a priority. Through staff training, head start employees are helped to see things from men's perspective to enable them to create an inviting atmosphere for fathers.

For fathers of older children, some schools offer father-child book groups, publicize the importance of father involvement in newsletters, and sponsor boys nights out where fathers are invited to chaperone their sons at an all night school party. Schools involved in such activities note that it has been relatively easy to get 25 men to volunteer for these events and that having so many dads networking with each other has been one of the many benefits of the program. Another time when schools are likely to see fathers is at conference time. Some teachers seize the opportunity to engage fathers by prescribing a book that the father read with their child.

Father presence is essential to our children. Men must continue to confront society's limiting expectations of fathers by participating more fully in their children's lives. Families and workplaces must find ways to enable greater father involvement. And perhaps most importantly we must take every opportunity to recognize the importance of the small and large things men are doing for their kids every day.

Here are a few resources in print and on the web:

Braun Levine, Suzanne. *Father Courage*. Harcourt Publishing, 2000.

Pruett, Kyle. *Fatherneed*. Free Press, 2000

Fathers' Involvement in Children's Learning (CD-ROM). 1-800-USA-LEARN

ChildTrends Research Brief, "What do Father's Contribute to Children's Well-Being?"

www.childtrends.org

Dads and Daughters is an organization promoting fathering daughters at

www.dasdanddaughters.org

Dads at a Distance is an organization promoting father involvement for dads whose work takes them from home. Find out more at www.daads.com

The Fatherhood Project is a national organization that promotes father participation. They have a great web site with many links and resources at www.fatherhoodproject.org.

The Family and Work Institute is a non-profit center that provides data to inform decision making on the changing workplace, changing family, and changing community at www.familiesandwork.org.