

# Family Assets ... Building Blocks for Life



## Fact Sheet



Family Life Month Packet  
Family and Consumer Sciences

# Beyond the Stress: The Next Generation of Fathers

Joseph Maiorano, Extension Agent, Family and Consumer Sciences, Jefferson County

It is encouraging to read that the data collected in one research survey indicated that 40% of the fathers interviewed would like to have more time to spend with their children than they currently have. On the one hand, this implies that a substantial number of men are motivated to be more involved in relationships with their children. On the other hand, that same data suggests that more than half of the fathers in the country do not want to spend more time with their children than they currently do (Lamb, 1997).

Why would the majority of fathers not want more time to spend with their children than they currently do? One reason may be that some of the fathers surveyed felt that they already have an adequate amount of time to spend with their children. Another reason may be the high level of stress associated with fathering. Therefore, as a means for fathers to control their level of role-related stress, they may not want more time to spend with their children than they currently have.

This fact sheet will look at fatherhood as a culture and explore how its evolution over the past two centuries may have moved men towards improved fathering. However at the same time, fathers may be encountering increased stress associated with this new role.

Cole & Cole (1993) state that, "culture consists of human designs for living that are based on the accumulated knowledge of a people encoded in their language and embodied in the physical artifacts, beliefs, values, customs and activities that have been passed down from one gen-

eration to the next (p. 17). From this definition, it is possible to classify fatherhood as a culture.

Implicit in this definition is the stability of a culture over time. Yet, the culture of fatherhood has been in a gradual state of evolution. Lamb (1986) summarizes these changes, suggesting that over the last two centuries the "dominant motif" of fatherhood has shifted from "moral teacher" to "breadwinner" to "sex role model" to "new nurturant father" (pp. 4-6).

Cole & Cole (1993) define cultural evolution as, "the result of successful innovation of earlier generations that are passed on to succeeding generations through language and by example" (pp. 71- 72). The culture of fatherhood is evolving and it may be the result of successful innovation, but language and example are missing as the means by which these changes are passed on to succeeding generations. Daly (1993) reports that one of the major reasons given for why fathers have been reluctant to assume the new father role is the lack of exposure to appropriate role models. Fathers are often unavailable to provide their sons a model of fatherhood. Without appropriate paternal role models to help new fathers meet this heightened expectation, there is an increase in the level of stress for fathers with young children.

The stress associated with a father's role ambiguity may be compounded by society's heightened expectation for how fathers should act. Pleck & Pleck (1997) define the "new father" as one who changes diapers, schedules medical appointments, and knows the name of his child's

teacher. The “ideal dad” is emotionally and actively involved in fathering. However, society may be holding an expectation of fathering that is actually a cultural myth propagated in movies and television commercials. Nevertheless, new fathers are aware of this expectation. Fathers, who may not want more time to spend with their children, may feel that even if they had additional time, they lack the knowledge, experience, or modeling to ensure successful role fulfillment.

Yet, there is good news for fathers and future fathers whose past father models were deficient. These men are in a position of creating new models for what it means to be a father. Today’s fathers who did not have a father role model, yet choose to be active participants in their child’s life, are moving beyond the stresses of role ambiguity and into successful role fulfillment. They are then capable of being role models to their children in a way that represents a departure from previous generations of fathers who were unavailable to them as models. Instead of presenting an inherited model of fatherhood to their children that is rooted in the past, these fathers appear to be focused on the construction of a new fatherhood model formed from the values they hold. With appropriate father models, fatherhood is able to evolve with new fathers fulfilling their role with lower stress than the generations preceding them.

## References

- Cole, M. & Cole, S.R. (1993). The development of children. New York: Scientific American, Inc.
- Daly, K.J. (1993). Reshaping fatherhood. In W. Marsiglio (Ed.) *Fatherhood: Contemporary theory, research, and social policy* (pp. 21-40). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lamb, M.E. (1986). The changing role of fathers. In M. E. Lamb (Ed.) *The father’s role: Applied perspectives* (pp. 3-27). New York: Wiley.
- Lamb, M.E. (1997). Fathers and child development: An introductory overview and guide. In M.E. Lamb (Ed.) *The role of the father in child development*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (pp. 1-18). New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.
- Marsiglio, W. (1993). Fatherhood scholarship: Overview and agenda. In W. Marsiglio (Ed.) *Fatherhood: Contemporary theory, research, and social policy* (pp. 1-20). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Parke, R.D. (1996). *Fatherhood* (The developing child series). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pleck, E.H. & Pleck, J.H. (1997). Fatherhood ideals in the United States: Historical dimensions. In M.E. Lamb (Ed.) *The role of the father in child development*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (pp. 1-18). New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Family and Consumer Sciences, 1787 Neil Avenue, Columbus, OH 43210

For more information, visit the Human Development and Family Life web site at:  
<http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/famlife/index.htm>