

Fact Sheet



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Strong Families ... Strong Futures

Reawaken Not Re invent: Fathers as “Mothers”

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With the new role of becoming a father comes an overshadowing fear. Fear of dropping or injuring a fragile newborn? Fear of an inability to perform basic caregiving tasks? No, rather a lingering fear that we may have to become something about which we know nothing. I am not talking about the fathering role, but of a man's need to become an androgynous parental unit. If it is true that men must assume “feminine” characteristics in order to best perform the role of father, then I am feeling scared. I do not want to become a “mother” in order to “father” a child!

Webster's Dictionary defines “androgyny” as, “having the characteristics of both sexes.” Is it true that fathers have to be mothers? Can they? And is this best for children? This article will look at existing research to explore the role men assume as fathers.

Many men struggle with a feeling of inadequacy when it comes to parenting a child. They feel that it is only the child's mother who is inherently skilled to care for the child. These men sometimes think that if they can only mimic what the mother does that they will become comfortable in their new role. However, new mothers are also involved in on-the-job training, and the mimic-the-mother strategy soon falters.

In his article, “The Paternal Presence,” Kyle D. Pruett states that, “It [mother-mimic tactic] feels wrong at all

levels, because it is. The child doesn't expect it, and the father can't do it. This lesson is a father's first on the journey to complete himself as a man-now-father: Fathering is not mothering any more than mothering is ever fathering.”

Men as Nurturers

Pruett uses the term *reawaken* when he describes the role of nurturer as it is found in men. He uses the prefix to illustrate how boys and men at different times in their lives can be seen as nurturers. Before the age of five, as many preschool boys as girls can be found in the housekeeping area exploring their nurturing role. After this, the instinct to nurture is often repressed, although it may reaffirm itself around the birth of siblings, the entrance of pets into the family, or through empathy and concern for the physically vulnerable.

Men, from the beginning, are involved in a pregnancy. Men often gain weight and suffer sickness as they wait for the child to arrive. It is not uncommon for men to even experience postpartum depression after the child's birth.

Research has shown that fathers can nurture and rear their children quite competently. Pruett cited Park and Sawin (1975) who found that fathers were capable of feeding their babies formula appropriately and on time as efficiently as were their spouses, regardless of previous

experience with infants. Some nurturing may even be on a subconscious level. In delivery rooms and nurseries, fathers were found to address their children in a falsetto voice. Neonatal research indicates that newborn infants, even though born prematurely, attend better to a high-pitched verbal stimulus than to lower-pitched sounds.

Fathers and Mothers

Fathering has many unique characteristics. Pruett articulated that, “innate paternal characteristics” are important to the well being of children’s development over time. Biller and Meredith (cited in Pruett, 1993) found that fathers played with their children differently, using fewer toys, when mothers were not present. Men encouraged their children’s curiosity in the solution of intellectual and physical challenges, supported children’s persistence in solving problems, and did not become over solicitous with regard to their failures. These behaviors, according to Biller, illustrated important differences in the way fathers and mothers respond to their babies’ exploration of the environment.

Parke (cited in Pruett, 1993) found that if fathers were involved in the daily care of their infants during the first eight weeks after childbirth, the babies were more socially

responsive and able to withstand stressful circumstances later during their school years. Macobby and Jacklin (cited in Pruett, 1993) found that men were more likely to clarify gender identity of their children both to themselves and to the outside world than were women. Men tend to use masculine-specific language with their sons and feminine-specific language with their daughters, which suggest that men play an important part in clarifying gender roles.

“Obviously,” states Pruett, “fathers interact with their children in ways different from the way mothers do and the long-term effects of these interactions do not seem to be innately damaging to children.

So I, and other men, can be nurturers and we can complement mothers in parenting children. As men, we know the nurturing characteristic is within us and we can relax knowing that this and other parental characteristics will reawaken without our having to become mothers, too.

Bibliography

Pruett, K. D. (1993) The paternal presence. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*. Families International, Inc.

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