Forty years ago it was a novelty for a father to be present at the birth of his own child. Today we would be shocked if, instead of talking his partner through each painful contraction, Dad was downing a beer at the pub or nervously pacing up and down the hospital corridor.

Fatherhood in Transition

Feminist academic, author and father, Hugo Schwyzer, sees a real change in the way that the current generation of fathers are approaching their parenting role: “Many of them see fathering as a genuine vocation. They don't just pay lip service to putting family first. They do it.”

While the shift towards shared parenting is real, a recent study found “seventy-five percent of men worry that their jobs prevent them from having the time to be the kind of dads they want to be.” And when asked what single change would make the greatest difference in their ability to juggle work and family life, fathers named workplace flexibility as their top demand.
The Father Effect: Positive Effects of Involved Dads

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The research shows that fathers are right to want to spend more time with their children. Involved fathers have a significant and positive impact on their children’s development. And while the greater economic security that results from having more than one parent is a factor, that alone does not fully explain the father effect.

Intelligence

Numerous studies have found that children who grow up in a household with a father show superior outcomes in intelligence tests. This is particularly marked in the area of non-verbal (or spatial) reasoning—ways of thinking that are important in fields such as mathematics, science and engineering. The IQ advantage is most commonly attributed to the way that fathers interact with their children, with an emphasis on the physical (especially roughhousing and outdoor activities) and play involving the manipulation of objects like blocks and Lego, rather than language-based activities. However, a study of Chinese parents found that it was a father’s warmth toward his child that was the most important factor in guiding a child to academic success.

Emotional IQ

While much attention has been paid to the positive effect fathers have on children’s intellectual development, a recent Canadian study provides new insight into the impact fathers have on their children’s emotional development.

Pougnet’s research shows that children benefited most when fathers:
- responded in a consistent manner to positive and negative behaviors.
- set limits that were appropriate and logical.
- explained the reasons behind those limits.

According to Pougnet, this approach “helps children to understand what is expected of them and feel secure that their parents will both keep them safe and encourage them to act independently when appropriate.”

Previous research has shown that children experience an increase in negative emotions and behaviors when their father is absent, including:
- greater sadness, withdrawal and anxiety.
- increased aggression, impulsivity and hyperactivity

In Pougnet’s research, girls’ emotional response to a father’s absence was more marked than boys’: “When fathers live with their children, their relation to the children becomes a source of emotional support and security. When there is a father-absent childhood, it becomes more serious than that.”

In Peugnot’s research, girls whose fathers lived with them when they were in middle childhood (ages 6–10 years) demonstrated less sadness, worry, and shyness as pre-teens (ages 9–13 years) compared with girls whose fathers did not live with them. The same was not true for boys.

Parental conflict can be highly damaging to a child’s development. In her view, “This research does not indicate that children whose fathers do not live with them are necessarily put at a disadvantage. Because couple conflict, in particular, is a risk factor for increased intellectual and emotional difficulties in children—it is preferable for children to grow up in a single-person household than in a conflict-ridden environment.”

What the Research Means

Parents can take heart from the growing body of research into the father effect, knowing that greater involvement by fathers is highly beneficial to children.

Parents, whether male or female, can learn from the positive findings on the father effect by providing children with:
- consistent responses to behavior, along with clear limits and explaining the reasons behind them.
- play opportunities that stimulate the child’s non-verbal reasoning abilities, such as blocks, Lego, ball games, roughhousing, outdoor activities.
- a warm and loving home environment that is free from persistent conflict, and seeking help when these problems cannot be resolved.

Access to parental leave and flexible workplace conditions should no longer be seen as a women’s issue—these demands are a matter of importance to men, women and children, who all benefit when fathers are more involved in childcare.

Dr. Schwyzer agrees that there is much room for optimism when it comes to the current generation of dads: “Our fathers loved us, but often lacked the vocabulary to express it and the skills to put that love into tender actions. This younger generation has those tools.”

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