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#### Editorial: In Defense of Fatherhood

During a recent shopping excursion, I accompanied my wife as she browsed in a maternity store. In reality, I was letting her shop while I managed our two year old daughter. It was in this store that I first came across an article in the February 2007 edition of *Parenting* magazine entitled, “The Baby-Daddy Connection: Helping Them Bond - - Think Diapers, Dancing, and More.”

What ensued next was a rant that went something like this, “Yeah, that’s what we need! We Neanderthal men are so backward in our emotional and relational skills that we are just completely inept when it comes to bonding with our children – so much so that we need the help of women, experts by chromosomal endowment, and some pinheaded, self-appointed expert on the topic.” Needless to say, I was not amused by this but had managed to embarrass my wife and garner the attention of the clerk.

While the actual article is a bit less frustrating than my initial impulse may have warranted, I cannot help but notice that the title and opening paragraph play on what seems to be a fairly common stereotype: men just can’t “bond” with children the way that a mother can. Balderdash! The article does go on to note that perhaps a new mother might find that if she *backs off* and does not try to *correct everything the father does*, that the father will develop his own ways of bonding with the child that are healthy and meaningful to both father and child. Well, it had some redemptive value I guess.

What this may be eluding to is the notion that fathers just might bond a bit differently with their children than mothers. No surprises there given that mothers spend nine months carrying the child, and often engage in the very intimate act of breast feeding. But I wonder what it is that fuels this myth that somehow fathers require some type of special tutelage in order to develop secure attachments with their children. What follows are a few observations on the topic.

*Outdated Gender Norms.* Gone are the days where the majority of society believes that a woman’s place is at home raising the children while the father is off in the outside work force (or at least we hope that this norm is dying). This is not to say that there is anything *wrong* with making this choice for one’s family, but that is quite another matter. But at least one legacy of this remains: boys tend not to be as involved in childcare activities and certainly do not play with dolls that are not also equipped with machine guns. Thus, for some new fathers, they may really have less experience in specific child care activities. But it is a stretch to conclude that because of this (which is certainly not true of all men) a father does not know how to bond with a child. Lamb (1997) has even

observed that fathers in a primary caretaker role are about as sensitive and competent as mothers.

*Men will be Men, and They are Toxic (or, Boys will be Boys).* William Pollack and others have observed that there is a cultural myth that boys by their nature are aggressive and destructive. It is probably not too much of a stretch to suggest that these boys are expected to develop into aggressive and destructive men and fathers. Would it be any wonder then that mothers, the *allegedly* more loving and gentle sex by their very nature, would want to protect their children from these brutes? Of course, as clinicians and researchers treating and studying men and boys know that there is nothing essential to either fathers or mothers that makes them any more or less toxic or salubrious an influence on their children. Both fathers and mothers have the capacity for excellent bonding and nurture, and both have the capacity to be very destructive.

*Speaking of Essential Personnel.* It would be very hard to forget the article by Silverstein and Auerbach (1999) that appeared in the *American Psychologist*. Honestly, its politically-charged and ultimately skewed title exemplifies what makes conservatives and religious folks skeptical about psychology. With the very misleading title of *Deconstructing the Essential Father*, the authors do go through reams of research to support the conclusion that healthy children can result from various family constellations. They go on to note that while it is best for children to have engaged parents, neither the mother nor the father is essential in raising a healthy child. It is hard to dispute this conclusion, but if a mother is not “essential” either then I do not quite understand the provocative title. Certainly one had to wonder if some of those criticizing or praising the article had actually read it. Since we live in a culture that thinks in sound bites (spaced in between nonsense news about celebrities), this article seemed to tell the world that fathers simply are not important. That is not what the article *said*, but that is what the authors *implied* in their title.

As I was preparing for this article, I came across an interesting study by Besser and Blatt (2007) in a recent edition of *Psychoanalytic Psychology*. The authors took 97 children (62 girls and 35 boys) between the ages of 11-14 and asked them to write descriptions of their mothers and fathers and to complete the Achenbach Youth Self Report form. The written descriptions were coded using the “conceptual level” scale of the Children’s Object Relations Inventory, which is used to evaluate the quality and complexity of a description of another person. Coding ranges from the sensorimotor-preoperational level, at which persons are described primarily by the levels of gratification and frustration they provide, to the Internal-Iconic level, at which persons are primarily described in terms of their thoughts, feelings, values, and motivations. One level higher is used to denote when the participant has used multiple levels in their descriptions. Although this study has a small sample size and relied on self-reported behaviors, the findings are nonetheless fascinating and deserve our attention. Girls whose object representations of their fathers were more complex than their mothers self-reported significantly more internalizing problems, such as anxiety, depression, and somatization. Similarly, boys whose object representations of their mothers were more complex than their fathers self reported more problems with externalizing behaviors such as aggression and delinquency. Not

surprisingly, children develop these conceptual representations of their parents through *quality engagement and attachment, or lack thereof*. The authors conclude that relationship with the same-sex parent seems to have some significant relationship to a child's emotional well-being as they enter adolescence. Perhaps neither parent is "essential," but that is a far cry from being unimportant.

It seems to me that one of our central challenges is combating this myth in a way that our culture might actually hear and *process* on a meaningful level. As a division, we possess a wealth of knowledge about the virtues and vices of various constructions of masculinity. We have stacks of research on fatherhood. Yet, it seems that relatively few of us (including myself!) take the time to engage the larger culture on these issues through various writing outlets or interviews for newspapers or television. I simply see no other way to affect change in this area unless we figure out how to compete with Brittney's meltdown and the paternity case of Ana Nicole Smith's child. And the latter is an unfortunate example of our competition.

#### References

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