

Editorial: Further Reflections on Fatherhood

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Fatherhood has been on my mind a lot recently. This past month has brought us Father's Day with the usual barrage of advertisements about making Dad feel "special" as well as more than one article about those who are deadbeats, abusers, or are folks otherwise disqualified from being honored as Father of the Year. Fatherhood has been on my mind for another reason as well. My wife and I welcomed our son into the world at the end of June, and he joins his big sister in making a lot of racket in our home.

Father's Day is a curious cultural phenomenon (as is Mother's Day). It seems to be a "Hallmark holiday" that has expanded into a highly commercialized event in which one's father is to be showered with gifts and affection – or at least bad ties and permission to play golf and barbeque. As I am sure happens in many consulting rooms across the country, Father's Day and Mother's Day become times in which many of my patients are filled with admiration and appreciation for the positive parental figures in their lives, or with anger and disgust about feeling forced to honor someone whose historical actions do not warrant it.

Although these days are not the most important ones on my personal calendar, there is another phenomenon occurring nearly exclusively on Father's Day that I find aggravating and exasperating. Around this day, we are often treated to the barrage of articles and television news spots in which we are reminded that men are a bunch of neglectful, abusive jackasses from whom children need to be protected. I find this maddening. For example, both of the major newspapers in the Chicago area ran stories about a few hundred men who were arrested for not paying child support. An article forwarded to the discussion list by Ed Bartlett that appeared in the *Ottawa Citizen Special* (Katherine Young and Paul Nathanson; "Another Chance to Bash Dad." June 16, 2007) detailed and roundly criticized this.

The relegation of fathers to irrelevancy (or worse) seems to happen quite early in the psychological life of a child. I have been reading a lot of children's books and watching a number of shows designed for young children, and I am surprised at just how infrequently fathers are included in comparison to the inclusion of mothers. In the stack of books populating my daughter's bookshelf, mothers are very well represented while only a few include fathers at all. What is going on here?

When I go to the bookstore, I always seek books that include fathers. I discovered a great book about becoming a big sister that gave the father a very prominent place in the story

– complete with diaper changing and bottle feeding (“I’m a Big Sister” by Joanna Cole and Maxie Chambliss)! I think that we need more such titles.

Once upon a time, the father was relegated to the waiting room during the entire process of childbirth, and his time was limited during the recovery process. In reflecting this past reality, many television shows of yesteryear often showed a very calm and happy pregnant woman informing her husband that “it’s time,” followed by him running around bursting with anxiety. He is then shown anxiously pacing in the waiting room until a nurse or physician appears to announce the child’s birth. Recent conversations with my immigrant in-laws suggest that this is still very true in many parts of the world.

In contrast, today many hospitals are taking extensive measures to welcome the father into the birthing and recovery experience. With the birth of our son, I was able to be present during the caesarian so that my wife and I could share seeing him for the first time. Just like all women who deliver at this hospital, my wife had a private room that had special accommodations so that I could stay with her through the night. Nursing staff were concerned about both of us, although they were rightly focused on the patient.

So, perhaps some cultural attitudes toward fathers are beginning to change. To the credit to the Chicago Tribune, they ran several articles throughout different sections of the paper that were honoring toward fathers – fathers who are divorced yet continue to be important positive influences in the lives of their children; “stay-at-home” fathers who forego long work weeks or career aspirations at all in order to raise their children; and a man who stepped in to be like a father to a boy in trouble. This is a welcome change.

Concluding Reflections. I long for a day when fathers are seen as more than fiscally responsible for their children. Many fathers – married, partnered, separated, and divorced – are very involved in the social and emotional lives of their children, or deeply desire to be so involved but are barred from doing so by family courts. I hope that we begin to listen to the voices from various walks of life encouraging fathers to take positive and active interest in their children. The rewards are great and the costs of not doing can be severe. Now I must go... my children need my attention!