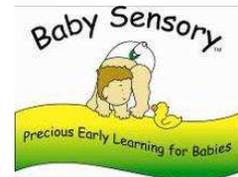


## Dads are important too!



Anthropologist Margaret Mead once said that fathers were a biological necessity, but a social accident. One of our greatest theorists, Sigmund Freud, believed that mothers were biologically suited to be better parents than fathers. In fact, fathers were relegated to the role of provider and little else. John Bowlby, a British psychiatrist, also reinforced the idea that the mother was the first and most important object of infant attachment. Even Harry Harlow's experiment with rhesus monkeys promoted the idea of the mother as the main care-giver. However, male rhesus monkeys have been shown to make good fathers in the absence of the female. Many animal studies support the view that males make good fathers. Marmoset and tamarin monkeys assume a fatherly role with their infants, chewing food for them and even assisting at the birth. Generally, the female's willingness is the crucial factor in determining paternal involvement.

Throughout history, fathers have traditionally taken on the lesser role of childcare. However, it would be a mistake to assume that mothers have some sort of biologically based care-giving superiority. In many cultures, fathers are actively involved in the nurturing of their children and do an excellent job. Hunter-gather traders living in tropical forest regions of Central Africa for example, share the nurturing of the infant with the mother. In many Latino families, both parents interact with their children with equal warmth and affection.

Current economic instability has redefined what it is to be a father. More women than ever before are returning to work after the birth of the baby. There has also been a gradual cultural shift in the institution of the family as the need for child care has increased. Many men now combine their traditional economic role with a nurturing one.

Despite Government initiatives to recruit men into the childcare sector, they are still in the minority. Possible barriers include the predominance of part-time jobs, low pay and poor career structures. The fact that childcare is still seen as 'women's work' is possibly the biggest deterrent. However, this denies young children valuable access to both role models. Men are just as important as women in a child's life and just as capable. Their interest and unique style of communication and involvement is strongly associated with social, emotional and intellectual development. Research shows that a male role model can have a huge impact on behaviour, which ultimately leads to happier, more productive children.

### **Paternal attachment**

The father's relationship with his child often begins as he adjusts to the mother's pregnancy. As the baby gets bigger, the father can feel the baby kicking and turning inside the mother's abdomen. The experience of an ultrasound scan can also heighten feelings of attachment to the developing foetus. High interest during the pregnancy has important consequences for the father's level of involvement after the baby's birth. However, fathers that want to achieve their goals before the onset of parenthood may be less involved in the pregnancy and possibly less committed to parenthood. Marital tension can also lessen paternal interest and involvement.

The release of certain hormones strengthens the father's feelings towards his baby. Although oxytocin has been noted for its effect on bonding in the mother and the baby, vasopressin plays a much bigger role in the father. Vasopressin is released in response to close physical contact. During pregnancy, the father becomes more protective towards the expectant mother and after the birth; the hormone helps to bond with his baby. Vasopressin tempers sexual drive and makes him want to stay at home with his family. For this reason, it is often described as the 'monogamy' hormone. However, this may only happen in a

committed, loving relationship. Generally once the father has become involved, he will maintain a close attachment to his child even if he lives apart.

Several theories have been proposed to explain the father's willingness to participate in the upbringing of his children. Some of these include:

- Biological closeness
- Readiness for fatherhood
- Education
- Financial security
- Culture and religion
- The number of hours worked
- The mother's employment
- Psychological adjustment
- The father's relationship with his own parents
- The quality of the marriage or partnership
- The mother's attitude towards his involvement

A key factor in the level of paternal involvement is the mother's attitude about her partner's competence in care-giving and comfort. Her willingness to share the care of the infant will be a major influence in determining his future involvement with the baby.

### **Paternal involvement**

Studies show that most fathers want to participate in their child's upbringing from the start. Generally speaking, the more actively involved and interested the father is, the greater the intellectual development of his children. Recent findings suggest the average level of commitment to be about two hours per day. This is a notable improvement compared to the mid 1970s, when fathers devoted

less than 15 minutes per day to their children. However, the total amount of time is less important than the *quality* of interaction.

Scientists believe that paternal involvement adds to the development of the child in a unique and important way. For example, fathers encourage exploratory skills, which support the development of independence. They may also engage in rough-housing activities such as wrestling and chasing, which reinforce the notion of self-control. Fathers may also expand their child's horizons by playing with toys in non-traditional ways. For example, he may take a toy and place it on his head or throw a cushion instead of sitting on it. Fathers that are good at playing with their children challenge them to find new ways of doing things. This has a huge impact on thinking, reasoning and problem-solving skills.

The father can also influence his child's development through direct teaching and daily interaction. Babies reach physical milestones sooner when he is actively involved in their play. They are also more likely to make friends and behave less aggressively when they go to school.

Girls that grow up with a loving, involved father are more likely to have healthy, emotionally balanced relationships with males in later life. Boys who grow up with a loving, involved father are less likely to be violent because they have learned how to channel their masculinity and strength in positive ways.

### **Non-resident fathers**

Although it is impossible to discuss the different situations and circumstances that allow fathers to develop and maintain relationships with their children, research by the University of Newcastle upon Tyne highlighted the fact that most men want to make a positive contribution to their development.

Even if the father is unable to spend regular time with his children, they can still benefit from limited attention, warmth and affection. Fathers can also have a positive influence on their children's development by taking them on outings and by attending school activities. Giving children love, attention and richness of care is something that all parents can do regardless of whether they are male or female, single or non-resident.

### **A healthy balance**

Fathers are just as essential to healthy child development as mothers. Having two involved parents can add variety and dimension to the infant's experience of the world and make a positive contribution to all aspects of their lives.

From an early age, babies can tell the difference between the way in which the mother and the father interact with them. Fathers may tickle, tease, bounce, wrestle and throw their children in the air more than mothers. They may also encourage competition and independence. By contrast, the mother's approach may be gentle, quiet and sympathetic. The different styles of play teach the baby that men and women are different. This understanding is critical for their development.

Both parents may talk to their child differently. The father's style of talking may be brief and directive, challenging the child to expand linguistic skills. The mother's vocabulary may be more descriptive, softer and verbally encouraging. Children who experience both styles of parenting are at an advantage because they know how to communicate with others.

Fathers tend to prepare their child for the reality and harshness of the real world, while mothers may be concerned with things that could hurt them. For example, fathers may be more likely to tell their children that if they are unkind

to others, no-one will want to play with them. Mothers are more likely to offer comfort and protection from harm. Both are necessary as children grow into adulthood.

### **Men in early years**

Studies have repeatedly highlighted the positive role that fathers can have in their children's learning and development. As a result, many schools are pioneering ways to involve fathers in projects such as cookery, computing, reading, craft, sports, games, maths and other classroom work. Fathers are also being encouraged to contribute to their children's out-of-school learning. In a world where television often dominates children's lives, showing an interest, in what they do, helping with homework and reading are more important than ever before.

Strategies that encourage men to be involved in children's care are to be applauded. Indeed, Early Years providers have worked hard to recruit men to the childcare profession. Even so, men still make up less than 3 percent of the workforce. Social disapproval is still a huge deterrent. This bias is almost certainly linked with the assumption that the care and education of young children is essentially women's work. Sadly, some men also worry that their motives might be viewed with suspicion.

In the UK, the skills and knowledge involved in childcare are still not sufficiently recognised by the general public. In European countries such as Norway and Denmark, which attracts about 8 per cent of the male workforce, the educational and knowledge-based aspects of childcare have been widely publicised to attract more men to the profession.

According to research by the Children's Workforce Development Council, two-

thirds of single mothers wanted their children to have access to a male role model from an early age. If single mothers and their children are to be supported, it is important to acknowledge the complementary role that men can offer alongside women. Both bring different strengths and styles to their teaching roles. The parenthood education work being undertaken by Baby Sensory offers an example of what can be achieved in the current cultural climate. Karsten Temple, who runs parent-baby classes in Bath, believes that men can teach parenting skills every bit as well as women. He feels strongly that more men would consider a teaching career in childcare if they realised that their unique style of interaction had such a significant impact on a child's upbringing.

## **Conclusion**

Children who have benefited from paternal interactions from an early age get on better with their peers, are academically more successful, stay in school longer, use drugs and alcohol less frequently and are less likely to get involved with crime. They may also be better equipped socially and psychologically than children who receive very little attention from their fathers. Fathers who devote quality time to their children give them a far greater chance of growing up to be confident, optimistic, motivated, healthy adults. Fathers also develop lifelong bonds with their children that cannot be formed in any other way.

Fathers are one of the most important resources in the welfare of children in general. It is essential for them to spend time with their children. Children grow up so quickly and missed opportunities are lost forever.

By Dr. Lin Day, Baby Sensory