

## SECTION 2. RESEARCH PERSPECTIVES

### Role of the Father

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**ABSTRACT.** Fathers make definite contributions to infant development and are now spending more time with their children than in many past decades. This article reviews the most compelling research on the developmental importance of fathers, including father–infant attachment and interaction, and differences between maternal and paternal interaction styles. Results of a long-term study of primary caregiving fathers also are presented. *Pediatrics* 1998;102:1253–1261; fathers, infants, infant development, attachment.

At the close of our millennium, we find fathers and infants having more to do with each other than in many previous decades. The dramatic movement of women of childbearing years into the workforce, the softening of sexual stereotypes after the achievements of the women's movement, and expressed longing among men for deeper meaning in their lives have brought men into close contact with their infants, whether they want it to not. Joseph Pleck's<sup>1</sup> review of the past 20 years of father involvement research concludes that fathers' proportional engagement (caregiving and play) with their children, although still less than half of that with mothers, is up by one third over the past generation. Fathers' overall availability and accessibility to the child, however, has increased by half. Documented time spent with younger children ranges from 2.8 to 4.9 hours per day, with a heavy dose on the weekends, not the 12 minutes per day cited in the media. Federal surveys of child care arrangements of employed mothers indicate that fathers are as common a source of child care as are child care centers and family day care homes. Thus, if fathers are around more, exactly what are they doing and how is it affecting their infants' development?

Twenty years ago, we said we wish we knew. Now, we can say we wish we knew more, because we have learned much in the interim, but still not enough. Fathering continues to be underrepresented in child development literature in general, from developmental psychology through pediatrics and nursing to psychopathology. Phares and Compas<sup>2</sup> reviewed research in all major journals addressing clinical child development published between 1984 and 1992 and found that nearly half of all reported studies involved mothers only. Approximately one

quarter of the remaining studies did include father-related material but did not bother to differentiate its effects. The remaining quarter did measure father–child effects and consistently found them. Thus, when researchers bother to look for father effects, they always find them. They concluded that overreliance on mother variables has fostered not only an incomplete database with regard to child development, but also a heavily gender-biased one; "relations cannot be found among variables not investigated."<sup>2</sup>

It is interesting to speculate why this circumstance exists. Fathers have been harder to access in the past, given the way data have been collected. The influence of the researcher's gender seems unlikely; as authors, men and women both are well-represented. Discussions among the Yale Father Study Group in the 1980s suggested that it is exciting and developmentally appropriate, but potentially conflictual, for the infant to "... have to look away from the mother in order to see the father ... ." But a separation is a separation, and perturbations cause distress. Researchers themselves may have similarly felt less sanguine about turning away from mothers to find fathers, even in the laboratory.

Research does remind us that infants develop in messy, complex social systems and that fathers make unique contributions to that system. How fathers respond to the system, their influence on it, the way they attach to their infants, how those ways differ from those of mothers, and what difference it all makes to early infant development are the focus of this article, reviewing the most compelling literature addressing the first 2 years of life. Original research from my own 10-year longitudinal study of infants raised by primary caregiving fathers in intact families is then summarized. Finally, implications for clinical practice and suggestions for additional research are discussed.

#### PATERNAL RESPONSIVITY TO INFANTS

Attachment theory is embedded in the concept that when infants signal their needs, and adults respond appropriately, secure infant–parent attachments ensue; but does this hold for men as well as for women? Frodi and Lamb<sup>3</sup> found no sex differences in psychophysiological responsiveness to videotapes of quiescent, smiling, or crying infants. These findings were extended to investigate 8- and 14-year-old boys and girls in a similar research design, and Frodi and associates<sup>4</sup> concluded that there were "no bio-

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logically based sex differences in responsiveness to infants.”

Fathers of infants were found to be equally anxious as mothers about leaving their infants in the care of others.<sup>5</sup> The men’s skills at identifying their infant also are equivalent to those of women. Israeli fathers who were blindfolded and blocked olfactorily still were able to recognize their infant by touching their hands, as were their mothers.<sup>6</sup> Newborn nursery observations by Parke and Sawin<sup>7</sup> documented that fathers responded to infant cues regarding satiation, burping, soothing, and so forth, as effectively as did mothers. Fathers adjust their speech patterns spontaneously when interacting with infants, speaking more slowly, in shorter phrases, and using multiple repetitions of a musical nature.<sup>8</sup>

Father and mothers’ perceptions of their infant’s temperament are correlated, but not highly. This suggests that mothers may be more sensitive to different infant tendencies and characteristics and have different internal experiences of their infants and/or that their personalities affect their perceptions.<sup>9</sup> In my own research of primary caregiving fathers,<sup>10,11</sup> I found that fathers often were more sensitive to their children’s distress than were mothers, suggesting that this may in fact be a total-time-with-proximal-caregiver variable, and less dependent on gender. Paternal responsivity also has been shown to vary depending on the amount of infant care responsibility fathers assume.<sup>12</sup>

Individual characteristics in paternal engagement that do exist were shown by Belsky and co-workers<sup>13</sup> to remain stable over time, especially at 3 and 9 months, although paternal sensitivity is certainly affected by other variables. Satisfaction with marital partners is especially important for paternal engagement.<sup>14</sup> Cox and colleagues<sup>15</sup> also reported that fathers in warm and confiding marriages have more optimistic attitudes toward their 3-month-olds than did men in less satisfying or less successful marriages. Dickie and Matheson<sup>16</sup> elucidated further the importance (and unidirectionality) of spousal support by reporting that fathers’ interactions with infants were influenced more heavily by the quality of the marital interaction than were mothers’ interactions. The same is also true of the influence of marital satisfaction on the father’s involvement with medically compromised infants.<sup>17</sup> In summary, most fathers exhibit sensitivity to their infants, especially if supported by their partner (but not exclusively so). That attachment forms readily, especially in relation to the amount of father–infant interaction over time.

#### FATHER–INFANT ATTACHMENTS

How might we know whether an infant had formed an attachment to its father? Studies begun by Kotelchuk in the 1970s assumed that such an attachment would reveal itself in separation protest.<sup>18</sup> Twelve-month-old infants (and, subsequently, 15-, 18-, and 21-month-old infants) protested whether left alone by mother or father, showed positive relief on reunion, and lost the drive to explore in the interim. When separated from only one parent, half preferred the mother, 30% preferred the father, and 20%

showed no clear preference. Spelke and colleagues<sup>19</sup> elaborated these findings for highly involved fathers, finding that their infants protested less overall, and showed delayed separation protest in general. Still, there is no definitive data for 6- to 9-month-old father–infant pairs, when the most vigorous maternal attachment behavior is in evidence.<sup>20</sup> Cohen and Campos<sup>21</sup> did show that although 10-month-olds showed preferences for their mother as “secure bases” after brief separations, fathers were clearly preferred over strangers, giving credence to the fact that infants did attach to fathers hierarchically and differentially.

In an important study of attachment classification of mothers, fathers, and their infants, Steele, Steele, and Fonagy<sup>22</sup> analyzed father and mother differences in the Strange Situation Procedure. They found that the mother’s Adult Attachment Interview scores influenced (but did not predict) the father–infant experience. This suggests that fathers and infants form unique “states of mind concerning attachment in ways that influence each other.” Additional evidence regarding this unique state of mind can be found in Ferketich and Mercer’s<sup>23</sup> investigations of paternal attachment in experienced and inexperienced fathers. She found no difference between experienced and inexperienced fathers with regard to the intensity of their attachment, indicating that the love relationship formed with subsequent infants is as unique as the first.

Lamb’s landmark longitudinal study<sup>24</sup> of mother–infant and father–infant attachment was begun in 1974 to try to categorize the unique components of father–infant attachment. Home observations of 7-, 8-, 12-, and 13-month-old infants revealed no preference for either parent on attachment behavior measures. This changed in the second year of life, when boys showed preferences for their fathers and girls showed no consistent preference for either parent. Lamb<sup>24</sup> concluded that earlier claims of a hierarchy among attachment figures, with the more proximal caregiver becoming preferred, was not upheld by home observational data. Furthermore, Lamb observed that when infants in the study were stressed, attachment behavior increased and they organized their behavior around whichever parent was more proximal. Interestingly, when both parents were present, 12- and 18-month-olds turned to their mother, whereas at 8 and 21 months, there was again no preference. Thus, if there is any hierarchical period, it is relatively short-lived and may not endure.

Abelin’s<sup>25</sup> work on the father as a “significant other” for older autonomy-seeking toddlers (as they feel the need to be more separate from the mother) may explain why the hierarchical period may be short-lived. He suggests that at approximately 18 months, toddlers develop the capacity to observe the father’s appreciation of the mother as distinct from their own appreciation of her.

Lamb speculated further that the father’s interest in play may enhance their importance and that when such a characteristic is missing (such as in the Swedish father studies with Hwang and Frodi),<sup>25</sup> infants develop clearer preferences for their primary care-

giver. Overall, the infant–father connection is enhanced by paternal involvement, although mothers still are the preferred attachment figure in most families in which she provides the bulk of intimate care. Nevertheless, early and powerful attachments between infants and fathers have been seen in myriad studies.

#### FATHER–INFANT INTERACTION PROFILE

There is huge variation in the amount of father–infant interaction in any given culture.<sup>26</sup> Munroe<sup>27</sup> observed mother–child and father–child contact in Belize, Kenya, Nepal, and American Samoa, and found vast differences in father presence and absence, infant care time, competence, and maternal support for father involvement. Clearly, father–infant interaction is affected by many external factors. Fathers in dual-career Anglo-European families were more involved,<sup>28</sup> as were encouraged and prepared fathers. Lind<sup>29</sup> found that Swedish fathers, when taught child care techniques and encouraged consistently over time (short term does not work), remained involved long after infancy. Preterm infants are known to draw fathers into deeper levels of involvement than are comparably healthy infants.<sup>30</sup>

But the most robust finding is that the quality, not the quantity, of the social interaction between father and infant facilitates the infant’s connections to people and other sources of stimulation.<sup>31,32</sup> Yet practice helps make perfect—quality connections probably are also practiced connections.

#### MOTHER AND FATHER DIFFERENCES IN INFANT INTERACTION

Durable and different maternal and paternal styles are found consistently in father–infant and mother–infant pairs. Clarke-Stewart<sup>33</sup> found in observations of 6-month-old infants that fathers tended to engage in more physically stimulating and unpredictable play than mothers. Not surprisingly, such interaction elicited more positive responses from infants, and later from toddlers, meaning that children seek this type of behavior from fathers and reinforce it. Fathers tend to report greater satisfaction in more active pursuits with their young children, thus, it is mutually gratifying. They seem to have a penchant for making even the mundane routines more intensely physical endeavors, pushing the stroller, taking a bath, and so forth.

In verbal and nonverbal communication with infants, fathers use shorter, staccato-like bursts of language and physical stimulation, whereas mothers were more modulated and predictable.<sup>30</sup> Infants between 7 and 13 months of age respond more positively to being held by fathers, probably because mothers pick them up for caregiving, whereas fathers pick them up to play or in response to the infant’s request.<sup>34</sup> Father care tends to be more disruptive and unpredictable than mother care, and fathers can be more intrusive than mothers.<sup>35</sup>

Lamb concludes that fathers and mothers do not simply play differently—play itself is an important component of father–infant relationships,<sup>24</sup> as shown in African-American/Euro-American cohorts.<sup>36</sup> The

origins of these differences elude explanation, although social role plays a major part. Field<sup>37</sup> and Pruett<sup>10</sup> found that primary caregiving fathers resembled traditional mothers more than secondary caregiving fathers, although playfulness and “noncontaining interactions” remained stable regardless of level of interaction.

An enduring debate began 24 years ago when Maccoby and Jacklin<sup>38</sup> suggested that mothers and fathers treat their sons and daughters differently. Although they found differences, they felt that differential socialization of sons and daughters probably was not caused by sex differences. The latest contribution to the debate is a meta-analysis by Lytton and Romney<sup>39</sup> of 172 studies. They concluded that the only consistent influence was a very small (0.3 to 0.5 of 1 SD unit) engagement in play with sex-typed toys or games. Furthermore, any trends favoring parental sex difference in interaction style diminished with age. The authors concluded, “The present meta-analysis has demonstrated a virtual absence of sex-distinctive parental pressures.”

Regarding all the documented differences in mother versus father interaction with infants, I feel that the majority of the development-enhancing intimate transactions that grow healthy, loving infants eventually will turn out to be gender-neutral. These most likely will be proven to be enhanced experientially and not fundamentally skewed by the intriguing differences between fathering and mothering styles. Mothers and fathers share much of the competent nurturing domain, and that is what matters to children.

#### DEVELOPMENTAL IMPORTANCE OF FATHERS

A meta-analysis<sup>40</sup> of 11 studies observing fathers in the Strange Situation Procedure reported that infants tended to have similar types of attachment to both mother and father. The impact of variations in paternal behavior and attachment was investigated by Cox and Bithoney.<sup>41</sup> Fathers who were affectionate, had positive attitudes, and spent more time with their 3-month-olds would have more likely securely attached infants at 12 months. But the quality of care matters, not just the quantity. Easterbrooks and Goldberg<sup>42</sup> found children’s adaptations were enhanced by the amount, sensitivity, and quality of their father’s involvement, with quality being a more potent predictor than the extent of involvement.

The innate physical differences between mother and father can be quite stimulating to the infant when experienced in apposition. Fathers’ typically larger size, deeper voice, coarser skin, smell, physical attributes, and habits all combine to offer a distinctly different buffet of potential attachment behaviors. This very differentness may aid the infant in earlier and better recognition of mother or father. Such recognition may create an early paradigm for appreciating unique features that distinguish identifying attributes of important objects. This may well predispose the infant to heightened awareness of different social styles and thereby enhance social competence.



## LONGITUDINAL FOLLOW-UP OF INFANTS OF PRIMARY NURTURING FATHERS AT 10 YEARS

### The First Year

To determine the effects of intimate paternal care on the development of young children, and to differentiate potential idiosyncratic properties of paternal care from primary caregiver effects, I began a small longitudinal pilot study of children raised primarily by father in intact families.<sup>43</sup> The study assessed the developmental profiles of 17 infants 2 to 22 months of age, the psychological characteristics of the fathers and mothers, the fathers' nurturing patterns, and the marital relationship patterns.

The 17 families recruited had a broad income and education range. Eight of the fathers were unemployed, but the rest were graduate students, blue-collar workers, sales representatives, artists, computer programmers, real estate brokers, lawyers, writers, and small businessmen. Incomes ranged from none to \$125 000 annually. The mothers were nurses, secretaries, teachers, taxi drivers, welfare recipients, blue-collar hourly workers, and sales representatives. Their incomes, if employed, ranged from \$8000 to \$75 000 a year. Of the 17 children, 8 were boys, and 16 of the 17 were first-born. Parents ranged from 19 to 36 years of age; mean ages for fathers and mothers were 24 and 25, respectively. Few of the fathers had previous child care experience, although most had siblings. The father was the primary caregiver, and usually also the house manager, cook, and cleaner. Although arrangements differed from house to house, he was expected to carry the bulk of emotional responsibility for his offspring. The mothers were, however, very active in the care of the infants when they were home, usually in the evenings and on weekends. Sixteen of the 17 women continued to breastfeed for at least 3 months, although, on average, they returned to work after 6 weeks.

The infants were evaluated in the presence of their mothers and fathers using the Yale Developmental Schedules,<sup>44</sup> a composite of standardized instruments evaluating motor, language, adaptive problem-solving, and personal-social competence by chronologic age. Extensive home visits were conducted, and personal and developmental histories taken for the children and their parents.

In general, the children's performance was active and robust. They were competent and occasionally scored above expected norms. The youngest of infants (2 to 12 months of age) performed several of the adaptive, problem-solving tasks at the level of infants 2 to 4 months their senior. Personal social skills also were ahead of schedule. The older infants (12 to 22 months of age) performed as well. An interesting qualitative stylistic characteristic emerged frequently. These infants seemed to be attracted to, and comfortable with, stimulation from the external environment, and not restricted to feeling comfortable only within the intimacies of the parent-infant realm. These infants also seemed to expect that their diligence and curiosity would be appreciated and tolerated. They expected that play would be rich, inter-

esting, exciting, and reciprocated by the adults who entered their lives.

Twenty-two-month-old Helen knocked over her tower of 10 small red cubes, which she had so carefully and proudly constructed a moment before, with a round-house sweep of her small fist. She sat forward quickly on the edge of her high chair, and with a broad smile, fixed her eyes on the examiner with the excited anticipation that he would reciprocate appropriately and preserve the game she has just started, asking quizzically as though midconversation, ". . . so, yeah?" It was as though there was little in the world that could not yield to her eventually.

We also observed that these men had achieved the reciprocal nurturing attachment so critical to healthy infant development. The depth and rapidity of the attachment often amazed the fathers themselves. They did not, however, consider themselves to be "mothering." Although initially when they were confused or uncertain, many thought about their spouse or mother, within weeks they usually abandoned the mental portrait of themselves as stand-ins for a woman. Interestingly, they kept their sense of growing confidence to themselves, as though it was very unusual or might not last. They switched routinely, although at differing rates, to thinking of themselves as parents in their own right. They read their infants well, and their caregiving responses were observed to conform well to their infants' most complex needs. As to the slightly precocious performance of the infants and toddlers, it seemed this was a benefit of having two deeply involved parents as well as a competent primary caregiver.

### Follow-up at 2 and 4 Years

All the families were reevaluated at 2 and 4 years.<sup>45</sup> Second children had been born into 7 of the families. Fathers continued to serve as the primary parent in 8 families, including four that now had second children. This was particularly surprising because families initially thought that the father would be the primary caregiver for only 1 year. Meanwhile, mothers had become the primary parent in 3 families, all of which had second children. Fathers had returned to work or school in 6 families with second children and had ceased to serve as the primary parent. There had been one parental separation in which the father had retained custody.

Still, there were no signs of psychological vulnerability among the children. The quality of their relationships, the level and range of emotional maturation, and the ability to handle everyday stress did not differentiate these children from their more traditionally reared peers. Standardized testing using the Yale Developmental Schedules showed some slowing of the precocious functioning in the adaptive and personal social domains. Comfortable dependencies, zest for life, assertiveness, drive for mastery, and the usual childhood worries showed up on the semi-structured diagnostic play sessions in both boys and girls.

A certain emotional flexibility appeared as these children described their interactions with friends and playmates. There were rudimentary signs that they might be developing resilience and flexibility in cer-

tain areas of their personality, particularly in the ease with which they moved back and forth between feminine and masculine behavioral roles—not identities, but roles.

If anything was unique about their internal images of themselves or their parents, it was the sense of their father as a nurturing force. Empirical evidence would continue to mount throughout the remainder of the study that having a father as a primary nurturing figure stimulates more curiosity and interest in fathers as procreators than are found in most traditionally raised children. The children in this study saw their fathers (and mothers) as makers of human beings.

#### Follow-up at 6 and 8 Years

Follow-up at 6 and 8 years found secure gender identities in place and good school performance. The children now clearly demonstrated a strong interest in nurturing behavior in their interactions with peer groups and extended families.<sup>11</sup>

Fifteen families were still available for study after 8 years. The children, now 8 to 10 years old, included 7 girls and 8 boys. The children were interviewed in extensive diagnostic family interviews because developmental competence was no longer an issue.<sup>46</sup> Eleven fathers still were in major caregiving roles. Three more siblings had been born, and a second divorce was pending. Interestingly, in both marriages that failed, plans for the father to assume the primary nurturing role were made earliest. Both parents in each marriage seemed enthusiastic about the plan intellectually from the beginning and gave it a “good go.” Both mothers felt that the child care decision had played some role in the marital distress.

The 8-year data could be summarized almost wholly by the concept of generativity. Each of the 15 children had an ongoing commitment to growing, raising, or feeding something: plants (both house and garden) were watered and potted and propagated. Pets were nurtured, fed, walked, trained, even bred. In general, they all husbanded and shepherded a panoply of living things. Caregiving was valued as an activity in and of itself. Competence, spiced with competitiveness with other propagators, was obvious in their caregiving skills and their pride in exhibiting their “progeny.” This is a particularly robust version of the developmental line of caregiving in boys, as put forward by John Munder Ross.<sup>47</sup>

All of the children had chores—the younger, the more menial—but none were just “make work.” A work ethic was expressed and espoused by the children. They also knew a great deal about their parents’ work: what they did, where they did it, and with whom they did it. In Katelin’s words:

He makes pots and plates and stuff out of clay, and then puts them in a box of brick stuff. He’s really good at it. He starts a fire in there and then he looks in. It gets really hot, like a volcano, and if you went in there you’d get cooked. When the pots come out, they’re gorgeous—so he charges a lot of money for them.

The children’s work, especially the creative work, was ever-present in their homes. Susan’s father, a textbook salesman, had carefully framed and hung

her best pictures throughout the house. Katelin’s art work hung in the kitchen. As a 5-year-old, Allen had been interested in birds with “big beakers who liked to bite noses.” He was now a devoted bird watcher and member of the Connecticut Audubon Society. He had earned money for his own spotting scope, and his pencil and watercolor bird renderings were everywhere in the home. Helen’s favorite shell and beach glass collections were scattered throughout the house.

Although our focus is on children, it is worth commenting on the fathers’ increased comfort level with parenting. In general, fathers and mothers felt less competitive about parental discretion and power.

Helen’s father: “I have staying home down to a science. I am motivated to be home.”

Helen’s mother: “His ideas about the kids and home are better than mine. I really like work and I’m good at it.”

Also, fathers continued to turn their own childhood wishes for a more involved father into actually being a more involved father.

Allen’s father: “The more experience I have loving Allen, and being involved in his growing up, the more my old hurts about my father and his distance from me seem to heal. Funny, I thought it would be the other way around. You know, make it worse, not better. It’s better the way it is between Allen and me.”

#### Follow-up at 10 Years

After 10 years, 14 families remained available for study. The children ranged from 10 to 12 years of age and included 6 boys and 8 girls. Siblings ranged from none to 3. Nine of the families still had fathers who shared in caregiving or serving as major caregiver in the family—cooking, transporting, helping with homework, disciplining, and so forth. The other 5 families had mothers at home either half or full time, with the father still working full time away from the home. There had been a second divorce, and the family chose not to continue participating in the study.

We conducted a 1½-hour semistructured interview with the child alone with one interviewer. Although open-ended enough to follow the child’s narrative, interview data was collected about school performance and attitudes, health, moods, recurrent or important dreams, friendships, interests in art and sports, family relationships, gender issues of role and stereotype, and life or plans.

To address the contextual issues, the interviewer and an observer also conducted a 1½- to 2-hour semistructured family interview after the individual assessment. The family interview was conducted with the child and family, typically at the family home.

#### Helen

Helen now described herself as a “soccer junkie” and was in her uniform and pads for her interview. Her father had been her coach up to this year, “. . . because we both thought we needed a break from each other. He thought he knew everything about soccer, and I did too, until I went to soccer camp last

summer and learned more than he could teach me. I miss having my dad at practice, but I'm playing great!" As for her friendships, she beamed as she reeled off a list of six best friends, three of them boys. She organized a mixed indoor soccer league in the off-season and made up rules "to be fair to everyone." This was obviously a source of great joy for her.

How was Helen feeling about both parents these days? She felt close to both and felt they knew her well, describing them as being "different, not better, not worse." She experienced her dad as easier to "hang out with" than her equally loving and loved mother. "My mom is neat, but she kinda nags. My dad is cool."

We wondered whether this self-awareness might have developed from being so in touch with both parents; that a child sees himself reflected in two differing styles of caring and teaching. Helen described the value of both parental styles:

Dad tolerates my confusing life better than Mom. When I changed my mind thousands of times about who was coming to my birthday, he just let me be nuts for a while and said, 'Let me know when you're done being crazy about this.' Mom would have gone crazy with me, and that's not the best way to handle my being nuts.

In the family interview with her parents and 8-year-old sister, Helen and her father teased each other vigorously and mercilessly about who knew more about soccer, the Red Sox, the Spice Girls, and so forth. Her mother and sister rolled their eyes, giving them a gentle "knock-it-off" sign, with little effect. Still, although Helen and her father communicated well and enjoyably, her nonverbal connection was more with her mother, leaning back against her mother's chest as she wove their fingers together. When asked about any changes in the way the family was getting along these days, her father replied with mild but evident distress, "Helen doesn't tell me as much about her life as she used to," to which Helen replied, "Oh, Dad, stop complaining, I'm supposed to have a private life *sometime*." The mother gave her a warm hug from behind, as though to reward her daughter's declaration of growing autonomy, while giving a reassuring glance to her husband across the room.

Although well-defended, it was still clear that Helen's 38-year-old father, who now worked 30 hours out of the home in a job that was "just OK," was feeling a new remoteness, benign though it may be, in his relationship with his older daughter. His wife had been promoted recently and was involving Helen in some office work, lending lunch, travel, and social time to the mother-daughter life. Although Helen and her father remained affectionate and close, she was now confiding more in her mother (while also arguing more) and volunteered that she preferred to have her mother do the driving to the movies and the mall, because "Dad embarrasses me in public sometimes because we are so close and he thinks he knows me so well."

Later in the interview, we asked Helen to explain "embarrassed." To her it meant, "He likes to joke about stuff in public, like he wants my friends to

know that we are close. But it feels kind of awkward, having him do that around my buddies, especially my girlfriends. He is my Dad, but he is a guy—he can't help it!" It was as though Helen had discovered a father in whom gender had achieved a new salience for their relationship.

Allen

Allen, now 11, compared how his mother and father gave him instruction: "Mom teaches like a teacher: 'Remember this, remember that.' Dad plays with me a lot and tries to sneak in the learning." His father corroborated this description: "While playing with him, I try to teach him to compete hard but fair (I don't let him cheat), how to deal with frustration and losing (we don't play for a while if he starts to whine and complain), how to reinforce new skills and how to handle power and aggression." (Allen: "He doesn't use all his strength all the time, but I do!")

The oldest of three, Allen is especially proud of his responsibilities with regard to his little sister. He taught her to "ride a bike, and use the potty" and is starting to teach her to read. He winks to the interviewer as he says "read," indicating he knows full well she merely memorizes what comes next in his dramatic readings of *Curious George*.

His role as a caregiving older brother was valued by his siblings, who kept "telling him secrets" during the interview. When pressed to reveal their content by his mother, Allen said, "They are just us kids talking, Mom, nothing to worry about." When asked about any recent changes in the way the family was getting along, the mother responded, "Allen seems to be giving me a pretty hard time these days, right, Buddy?" Allen fell silent for a moment, looking more thoughtful than wounded. "I think that's right, Mom. You are bugging me about my homework, my room, how long I'm in the shower, or on the phone—you are all over me." The father broke in with a slight edge in his voice, leaning forward aggressively in his chair to cut off the "angle of fire" between his wife and son: "It's not quite that bad, but there is more arguing than there used to be, with both of us. You don't listen the way you used to, especially to your mother." The younger sister, age 7, both excited and anxious by this interchange, yelled spontaneously, "Fight! Fight!" and humorously brought the "confrontation" to a close when Allen swept her up in his arms and lovingly called her a "troublemaker." She squealed in delight and queried, "Me? No! You're the troublemaker!"

In this family, the continuity of communication and closeness was transforming around Allen, and his parents both were reacting strongly. The mother felt that Allen was arguing with her more, but that they still managed to feel loving toward one another. Allen's father appreciated Allen's beginning search for autonomy and felt less threatened by it. In the meeting, he closed his reflections on the interview by saying, "I could never imagine talking with my parents about myself and my feelings the way Allen did here today, I would have been too worried they'd be



hurt or they wouldn't get it. I'm proud of him for saying what he feels, and of us for getting it."

In his individual interview, Allen described a recurrent dream that started when he began the 6th grade:

He is riding his brand new trick bike back and forth along a country road with his mother and father at opposite ends of the road. He remembers that the road signs say "One way, this way," but he ignores them and just keeps riding faster and faster back and forth until it starts to rain. He comments that it's a "weird dream" because he'd "never bike alone—his friends are always with him." He adds later that he "remembers feeling a little scared riding one way, but not the other."

Sorting out his loyalties, even at this age, is hard work, even for the unconscious.

### GENERAL FINDINGS

Although we have focused only on 2 families in this review, we analyzed all the interview and family interview data for the study population and found that the children still are developing well in the relevant domains and their families continue to handle their maturational needs reasonably well, despite the changes brought about by imminent adolescence. Again, no statistically significant data could emerge from such a small pilot study, and a control group is not possible. Thus, we are informed by only the most robust consensual findings in this population, while being challenged to understand those things that surprise us. But there did emerge several interesting trends in both the children as individuals and in the families' nurturing dyads.

The most robust finding 10 years into the study was that the father's gender became more important to his parental identity. Early in his caregiving career, his nurturing behavior, motivation, and overall parental characteristics had outweighed the contribution of his gender. But now, his masculine gender emerged as a central attribute in his ongoing relationship with his child on the threshold of adolescence. The parallel ascendancy of gender in the life of his pubescent child is undoubtedly catalytic, rendering a new focus on this previously peripheral attribute in their identities.

Harmonically, the mother's femininity also assumes new salience, but with a slightly different meaning for the preteen. Her femininity had always been an important attribute because it was part of what defined her "differentness" from the father. This enhanced her power as the "important other" in the child's struggle for differentiation from the father, especially in the child's preschool life. Now, in the developmental era when the child is no longer merely rehearsing psychological and sexual autonomy, but differentiating "for real," her femininity clarifies and affirms her son's heterosexual interests and simultaneously reassures and challenges her daughter. It's as if she can say, "Trust me, I showed you before that it is OK to look beyond your father's love, and to look for me, and with me, for a wider world."

The most vigorous clinically apparent finding at this level of investigation was that the 8 girls and 6 boys felt that their friendships and relationships with

peers of both genders were very satisfying, and that gender was less important than the overall quality of friendship. Gender polarization seemed a marginal rather than a central issue. This was striking in its equanimity, because of the usual anxiety and conflict that typically suffuses previously comfortable and companionable peer relations in this era. More typically, gender differences become far more salient, as sexual and physiologic reproductive differentiation asserts itself in the arrival of puberty. Teasing, jokes, and sadistic humor all arrive to bind the conflict and anxiety that accompany this relational change.

But for the children in this study, the companionable humor and communication of latency survives still. The kids themselves are aware that they have a surprising number of friends across gender lines (especially compared with their peers) that still come comfortably to birthday parties and go to movies, community events, and occasional religious festivities as real friends, and not, as Katelin said, "potential honeys."

This transstereotypic clustering of friendships is rather counterintuitive for the young adolescent population. We theorize that having one's father as a primary nurturing figure during early developmental maturation, while one's mother stayed very close (most mothers continued to breastfeed after returning to work), creates a bedrock trust and comfort with present and future male and female objects. Herein the gendered aspects of those relationships may be less salient than the overall quality of the relationship. How long this relative ease will endure, and what role it plays in late adolescence when sexual differentiation is more complete and the search for intimacy in the sexual context is more libidinalized, is a matter for additional study.

### RESEARCH AND PRACTICE APPLICATIONS

Now that we have come to know that paternal presence is a positive and powerful force in the lives of young children, let's review what we know about how it happens. Pleck's<sup>1</sup> review of sociodemographic characteristics of paternal involvement show that fathers

1. are more involved with sons than daughters, especially when older, less so when young;
2. are less involved with older than younger kids, although father involvement declines less proportionally to mothers' decline in involvement;
3. are more connected to first-born sons than later-born children, to the prematurely born, and to those with difficult temperaments (both trends noted in mothers as well);
4. are more involved according to the more children they parent; and
5. involvement with children have not been found consistently to be related to socioeconomic characteristics, race, or ethnicity.

These data draw the profile of the way fathers naturally involve themselves with their children without intervention. Unfortunately, there is a pau-

city of reliable data evaluating the effectiveness of programmatic or practice-based enhancement of father involvement. Still, reviews and descriptions of particularly effective fathering programs and consensus strategies for promoting responsible fathering have been compiled by Doherty and associates.<sup>48</sup> Drawing from these reports and my own research and clinical experience, the following recommendations and strategies are presented that apply our research knowledge to best practices.

1. Critical developmental touchpoints should be used to encourage father involvement. Pregnancy and childbirth (of course), but also illnesses, entering into child care and school, marital separation, and job loss, all are opportunities for health and/or service personnel to reach out to the father and support increasing involvement. Entry into adolescence and divorce are two especially vulnerable periods when decreasing father connection can increase a child's risk for trouble significantly. Even family courts have begun to recognize this risk, and parenting classes for divorcing mothers and fathers are increasingly available (although unfortunately of uneven quality). These are all wide-open windows of opportunity that should not be missed by pediatricians, nurses, early childhood educators, early care providers, or policy makers.
2. Encourage fathers to establish legal paternity. In the event of marital separation, a father has a better chance of staying active in his child's life if he commits his own personal and emotional resources to fatherhood. He has to stay active in the child and mother's life, benefitting his child's development over the long haul (most true for non-residential fathers).
3. As fathering is fused with providing, for most men, employment remains a critical element in involvement. This is especially salient for nonresidential fathers who tend to withdraw from their children when out of work. The reverse also can be true, implicating child involvement as a catalyst to returning to employment (this is an important, unresearched question to date).
4. Child care staff at all levels need reminding and training to promote responsible fathering. High expectations of father involvement need to be held by everyone, not just children. Otherwise the windows close and the opportunities vanish. As we have seen in the research and prevention literature, "parent" means mother 75% of the time. Professionals need reminding of the significance of the paternal presence, or they, by habit alone, leave them out of appointments, procedures, intake questionnaires, parent conferences, hospital visits, workshops, and so forth. Specific training and reminding for both male and female workers to encourage father-child involvement is economically and developmentally frugal.
5. Mothers need ongoing encouragement to support their partners' involvement with their children. Because of the societal expectation that mothers will be the central figures in their children's lives,

it may not be easy, or even obvious, that encouraging her spouse to care for their infant will serve the child's needs. Some women give lip service to paternal involvement, but then feel anxious or critical about the lack of skill men show initially in caregiving. In fact, men need the same opportunity to learn on the job as do women. Consequently, we need to support mothers through the anxious beginnings as fathers practice, in order to promote the long-term benefits of competent father care to her, her child, and her marriage.

6. Fathers need to be encouraged to work with fathers. Because men typically are less group-affiliative than women, they tend not to gather, physically or emotionally, around such a critical issue in their lives as fathering. Yet experienced fathers are a tremendous resource for both residential and nonresidential fathers. Although this remains a researchable issue, the support that fathers can offer to one another at difficult times and the modeling of robust and competent fatherhood are mentioned routinely by fathers who have been "rehabilitated" or sustained through experiences that threatened their role as responsible fathers. Mothers-only groups are very useful to at-risk mothers, and the corollary holds for fathers as well. Father to Father, a community-based, easily replicable program with broad applicability initiated by Vice President Al Gore uses experienced fathers as its chief resource and is highly regarded.

Confident though such recommendations may seem, we still are far from a comprehensive father-inclusion paradigm. Many special circumstances of fathering remain insufficiently understood or even identified. The variety of the fathering experience is as varied as that for the mothering experience. And as our society increasingly complicates itself, the inclusion of fathers with different experiences becomes even more critical. Ethnic differences finally are getting their just recognition; gay fathering, however, particularly of young children, remains uninvestigated systematically. Fathers are only just beginning to be included in critically important research on family violence, a particularly egregious oversight.

In the end, fathering, as with mothering, exists simultaneously for the infant and the family. It is influenced first by past experience, spousal expectations, economics, personal and marital values and behaviors, and, last, by our very own professional and institutional practices. The former requires our understanding, the latter our commitment and action.

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