

Bringing up father!

Why this issue of role of father?

Biological fathers in animal kingdom, except in Human beings do not participate in bringing up the offspring. Perhaps, more the involvement of the father more evolved is the society.

In the traditional societies of yesteryears, the word Gender was almost synonymous with sex and even today, generally it is used interchangeably. However, Gender means socio-culturally ascribed roles to each sex male and female. With the expanding horizons of education, empowerment and employability outside homes, these roles have to be redefined and assimilated in the process of upbringing of the family.

A traditional Father used to be a provider, bread winner, man about the family and the person who dictated- called shots! He apparently had a very limited direct role in child upbringing.

Current scenario is different. Substantial numbers of males are earning less than their counterparts. Many a times, wives are better educated, better skilled and better employed. An educational and economic need of modern life style compels young men to look for earning partners! Shared common goals for a decent living bring in the changing dimensions in sharing responsibility of child care. There are plenty of reasons for the change: Couples are waiting longer to have children and being more thoughtful about their parenting; economics dictates that both parents work, making it only fair that both be involved; and research continues to show developmental benefits to a child from having two involved parents.

Research in the west in '60s and 70s looked at only mothers' love and involvement and its effect on child development. As there were some correlations, it further triggered further research—but it told only half of the story. Now it is adequately documented that fathers' love and involvement is equally important if not more! It is said that there are "No Genes" for learning to change diapers or giving a warm hug!

Research has now proved that an involved father at the time of delivery of the baby means less pain, better breastfeeding initiation and less post partum problems including post partum psychosis. Further research has shown that a baby 'in utero' recognizes fathers voice as well if spoken to regularly and frequently. Within hours, with just the touch a father can recognize his offspring. While mother nourishes ,loves, promotes creativity(listens, allows to perform, experiment and fail at times) the father holds the child high, helps externalize, teach and prepare for the risk and uncertainties, follow instructions, work as a team and grow independent.

Significant Predictor

"Researchers discovered that father love sometimes explains a unique, independent portion of the variance. In specific child outcomes, over and above the portion of variance explained by mother love," Rohner and Veneziano note. "Indeed, some studies reviewed later found that father love is the sole significant predictor of specific child outcomes, after removing the influence of mother love." According to the authors, the studies they examined can be divided into six categories. Several studies look only at the influence of father love, typically as it relates to gender role development or father involvement.

The second set of studies concludes that father love, or lack of it, is just as important as mother love in relation to personality and psychological adjustment problems, conduct problems, cognitive and academic performance issues, mental illness, and substance abuse.

Studies in the third group claim there is a stronger link between father love and certain outcomes such as delinquency and psychological health and well being than between mother love and those outcomes.

According to the fourth set of studies, father love is the sole significant predictor of specific outcomes in the broad categories of personality and psychological adjustment problems, conduct and delinquency problems, and substance abuse.

The one study in the fifth group identified by Rohner and Veneziano finds that the effect of mother love on specific child outcomes varies, depending on the level of father love.

The final group of studies finds that father love is associated with one outcome for sons and another for daughters. According to some studies in that group, one pattern of paternal behavior and a different pattern of maternal behavior are associated with the same outcome in sons, daughters, or sometimes both offspring. For example, one study shows that adolescent daughters' self-esteem is best predicted by fathers' physical affection and mothers' general support. In comparison, sons' self-esteem is best predicted by fathers' sustained contact and mothers' companionship.

"The evidence seems clear that mothers are more effective parents when fathers are both supportive partners and nurturing parents," Rohner and Veneziano write. "And children are major beneficiaries when they are raised by warm, loving mothers and fathers."

"Men are inept parents" or "Dads do not matter" are irrelevant comments today, both bio-medically as well as socio-psychologically. Healthy child development,

Gender identity Responsible sexuality, Emotional and social commitment, and financial security all are favorably influenced by involved fathers.

Parent-child relationship:

Type of family and interpersonal relationship among the family members decide this relationship. Fundamentally, parental attitudes influence the way parents treat their children which in turn will influence the children's attitude towards parents.

Essentially, it is parents' attitude driven relationship.

Age, personality of the child and gender also influence this. Social status of the family and fathers' occupation (not necessarily income) influence these relations. Both upward and downward mobility in the social ladder demand a lot of adjustments for both father and child.

Children as they are children, developmentally, Egocentric normally, hence they have defined concepts of Good and Bad parents.

A good parent would do things for them, is permissive, fair, sets good example, inspires, loves, not fear, companionable, encourages "peers" to come home, accepts them, does not expect unreasonable achievements, grants independence etc...

A Bad parent would be critical of them, harsh, punishing type, little interested in peer groups, unrealistic, critical of failures, makes home stressful and unpleasant....

Children have concept of ideal parent commensurate with their age and personality. It keeps changing. They have parental preference as well. Mostly it is mother. It is reflected in time spent, play, expression of affection verbal and non-verbal and acceptance of disciplining.

Benefits of being involved!

Social and psychological scientific research has now established that the benefits of father involvement are self-serving too! Such fathers feel more self-confident and effective as parent, enjoy positive relationship with their children. They are more likely to be in stable marriage, less likely to be addicted to tobacco or alcohol, more health and safety oriented.

In short a better spouse, better worker and a better citizen he becomes if he is an involved father.

John McEnroe, a tennis legend of his time, ill-famous for his abusive behavior on and off the court, once carried his child on his shoulder, traveled in a bus with no room for him to sit down and he later on recounted this experience of having taken care of child under adversity as an experience which taught him to behave better! Fathers' involvement, improves the effectiveness of the co-parent i.e. it makes mothers' more effective.

Ways fathers can participate:

Express love by verbal and non-verbal communication. Play with the child. Monitor health, nutrition and immunization. Little later in age, teach simple rules of safe environ within the house, basic code of conduct and good behaviors (acculturation and socialization begins!).

By the 4years and more answer all questions. Create curiosity.-A life time learning tool! Offer alternatives, help the process of thinking. Progressively, teach value system, participate on projects, follow the scholastic responsibility,-home work etc...

During adolescence, monitor peer group influences, accept challenges to value system and challenge to your very existence as care taker! Communicate, freely, factually and in utmost confidentiality. Express genuine concern for his thoughts, worries, feelings, concerns, friends, interests etc... (Many of the may not be quite acceptable to your adult world!) Be available when the adolescent needs you and only as much as he or she needs you. Be Friendly but NOT a Friend.

What impedes Fathers involvement?

There are several real and presumed barriers to fathers' involvement.

Responsibility at work, inability to get leave, loss of wages at times are real but they are accepted and accentuated by the societal norms which prescribe that it is mother who is primary care-giver. This perpetuates, leading to presumed incompetence and lack of self confidence among fathers in issues related to child care.

Our health care systems also does not much do anything about the same .Doctors continue to talk to mothers, advise them, direct them and find them answerable. Except perhaps, while deciding on the cost of investigations or treatment, Fathers is on discount.

However, times are changing and changing for better. A recent study examining fathers and the Well Child Visit (Paediatrics, vol.117, Number 4, april 2006) conclude for the studied fathers that they want to be involved. They have unique questions and information need. Reframing the WCV for the child and family will remind parents of the role that a pediatrician can play in maximizing child growth and development.

What the Pediatricians can do?

A lot! As they are the best doctors, ideal teachers, role models, supporters of family as an institution and in our cultural settings even moral authorities and guardians. By changing their attitude and accepting greater role of Fathers, they sure will lead the positive change.

Expect fathers to participate.

Insists on seeing the couple, not only the mother.

When required, direct questions to both of them.

Demonstrate skills; teach the same to both of them.

Invite concerns and questions that fathers may have and respond to them with genuine praise and interest.

A lot depends on how best we perceive this socio-eco-cultural change and assimilate it positively.