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Fathers - Understanding the Vital Role That Fathers, & Father Figures, Play in Children's Emotional Development

Dads really do matter. Children need fathers – just as they need mothers – to love them, to be interested in them and to respond to their needs, making them feel valued and understood.



Fathers (and father figures) make a vital contribution to their children's development. What fathers have to offer their children is different from what mothers offer, but it is just as important to the child. The differences between men and women as parents are not laid down for us – each family discovers them in its own way.

Fathers also matter because they are important to their partners. Their parents' relationship is the model of relating that children take on board, so the success or failure of their own future relationships will be deeply influenced by how their parents manage things. That is not to say that parents have to be perfect. But it is important for children to see their parents working together to try to sort out the difficulties that every family face from time to time.

For any man, becoming a father is a huge step.

Until it has actually happened, no one really knows what it is going to be like for them.

Of course, there are many different ways of responding and this leaflet does not aim to lay down rules about how to be a father. The important thing is to take an interest in your children, enjoy being with them, and follow your own instincts. The vital message is:

- whether, and how, fathers get involved can make a big difference to their children's lives
- not getting involved means missing the opportunity of an enjoyable and rewarding relationship for both children and fathers.

Preparing to become a father

Fathers have as much to take on in adjusting to their new role as mothers do, so men need to be fully included in preparations for the birth of a baby. Time spent in preparing to be a father can make all the difference to how involved fathers feel when the baby arrives. Emotional and physical preparations for the arrival of the baby are just as important if you are going to become an adoptive father.

Childbirth and children can be regarded as a woman's world and men may sometimes feel as if they do not really belong. Without consciously realising it, men can feel very jealous of the attention that their pregnant partner is getting. They may react by becoming very busy with their own new projects.

Being present at the birth can be invaluable for the father's relationship with their partner and with the baby. Men may feel uneasy or embarrassed at the idea of attending antenatal classes. But both the physical and the emotional impact of the birth will be less stressful if fathers are prepared for the experience.

It is not always easy for fathers to be as involved as they would like because the health system may not always meet their needs. For instance, antenatal classes may be held during the day and employers are not necessarily sympathetic.

What kind of father will you be?

Many experiences affect how fathers behave. The way we are as parents is very much influenced

by how we were brought up ourselves. This runs very deep. Often, we may not be fully aware of just why we are behaving or reacting as we do. Some fathers, for instance, may find it very difficult to cope with their child's anger if they were never able to be angry with their own parents.

New fathers may work too hard without realising that they are hiding behind their work to escape from pressures at home. They may come to regret this later.

One of the most important things for a child is how their parents are getting on with each other.

It is a sad fact that many families split up during their children's early years.

The best start fathers and mothers can give their children is to create a happy atmosphere at home. The way to do this is for parents to sort out and agree arrangements between themselves. This applies to all sorts of issues such as looking after the baby, changing nappies or sleeping in the parents' bed.

Children, including very young infants, are very sensitive to the emotional atmosphere around them. If things are fraught between the parents – maybe about money worries or other stresses, not just about their relationship – children will react.

This may show up directly or in other ways, such as sleep difficulties, tantrums or other behaviour problems.

If it is hard for us to understand or to cope with what is going on, we sometimes need someone else to help us. The leaflets published by the Child Psychotherapy Trust help parents to understand their relationship with their children as they grow and develop.

Early days

Fathers usually underestimate the change a baby will bring to their family. Some men may try to carry on as if nothing is really different. But after they have a baby, most parents find they have less sleep, less money, and less sex!

It may take some time for you to feel closely involved with your baby.

Fathers need to spend time with their young family and try to take some leave from work when the baby is born.

It has recently become known that fathers can suffer from postnatal depression as well as mothers, although this often goes unrecognised. Indeed, in some ways the birth of a new baby may be even more demanding for the dad than for the mum. Everyone expects the new mother to be busy with the baby, but the father may be left feeling useless and redundant, particularly if he is not involved in the care of the baby. This can be especially difficult if the father is also unemployed and feels he is not able to fill the traditional role of breadwinner.

It is important to find someone to talk to if you are finding it difficult to cope with the new situation. Fathers may be able to tell their partner how they feel, but it may be easier to talk to someone outside the family. The GP or health visitor may be able to help, or a friend or family member who's also a father may be able to offer support.

Looking after the baby

The particular way that a father chooses to get involved with his children does not matter – as long as he actually does get involved.

Although some men hardly take on any baby care at all, others may work so hard at being a good father that they start competing with the mother over who is the best parent. They may get involved with baby care and housework in such a way that the mother starts to feel a bit pushed out.

It's important for fathers to try and achieve a balance so that they are helpful and supportive without undermining the mother or taking over. Nobody pretends this is an easy thing to do, particularly as you and your partner are likely to be feeling extra sensitive, and exhausted at this time.

Fathers and their partners

Fathers have an important role as partners – for the sake of the children as well as themselves and their partner.

It does not actually matter who does what in the family. For instance, in discussing what each partner should do around the home, what matters most is for parents to work out an arrangement that they are both happy with.

Couples can only do this if they both keep in mind how important their own relationship is with one another. Fathers have an important role to play in making sure that they carry on trying to have a separate relationship as a couple. It can be very easy to be so caught up in the excitement of the new baby, and the new role of parent, that this gets neglected.

The child's view of their parents' relationship is vital, and children will benefit a lot from seeing that their parents have a life of their own.

This means that fathers have to make sure that they keep talking to their partners. One of the commonest complaints that women make about their partners is that they do not talk about their feelings. This may say a lot about how we bring up little boys and it may be a hard thing to change – but it is really important to try. That way it is much more likely that a couple can sort out any problems as they arise.

Fathers and their children

There is no 'right' way for men to behave with babies and children. Expressions of tenderness are just as important as play. What matters is a father's enjoyment, and the interest he has in developing a relationship with his child.

Fathers often behave quite differently from mothers with their children:

- they may play rougher and tumble games
- they talk differently to their babies, and the babies recognise this and move differently in

response.

Even when they cannot see who the other person is, researchers can tell who is talking to a baby just by watching their reaction. Babies benefit from this different kind of attention.

Fathers have an important role to play for both girls and boys. Children benefit from having a close relationship with both parents, with each offering them something that the other does not. As children get older, a father's role continues to be important, but it changes.

- **Boys:** Their dad may be a role model. Some research suggests that their father's influence may have a lot to do with how sociable boys are.
- **Girls:** Having a good relationship with their father can have an impact on their self-esteem and sense of identity, especially while they are teenagers.
- **Teenagers:** Fathers are especially important in the teenage years. They may help with setting limits or may have a particular role in helping the teens to spread their wings.

Fathers on their own

Separated fathers

Being separated from your children is very painful for all involved and there is no way of making it easy, although it is possible to make it work for you and your child.

It will help if you can remain on good terms with the children's mother, even though this may be difficult.

It is important to remember that both of you are still parents, and children are usually loyal to both parents despite what either parent may think.

You and your ex-partner still need to work together as parents, if not as a couple. That way the children will have an experience of you working together in their best interests, even though you are living apart.

It is very easy for other issues to cloud the picture and affect your judgment. Help from someone outside the situation – friends, colleagues or agencies like those listed at the end of this leaflet – may help you to focus on your children's needs.

For all sorts of different practical as well as emotional reasons, it may be difficult to keep in touch with your children regularly. It can feel very artificial to see your children only at weekends or for outings, rather than the casual day-to-day contact you have from living together. You may lose touch with what their interests are. At some ages the last thing children want is to be seen out with their parents anyway, even when they are still living together. But you remain a very important figure in their lives and they need to know that you are there for them, so it matters a lot for you to manage this one way or another. It helps if you can keep in touch – whether it is through emails, phone calls, or postcards.

Lone fathers

Bringing up children can be demanding for two parents, let alone one. Being a lone parent is a tough job and carrying all the responsibility on your own can feel like a heavy burden. A lot will depend on the circumstances in which this came about.

- If the children's mother has left, you will all have to come to terms with very confused and painful feelings about how she could have done so. It may be a real struggle to find an honest way of helping the children with this when you are struggling with very similar feelings yourself.
- If their mother has died, it may be easier to help them to keep a positive picture of her alive in themselves. Even then, they will have all kinds of irrational feelings about what has happened. You need to be tolerant if you are to help them whilst you are grieving yourself. When their children's mother dies, fathers have to find maternal feelings in themselves.
- Every lone parent faces many personal and practical difficulties, with added complications for fathers because it is so much less usual for them to be the lone parent.
- Loneliness is usually a huge issue.
- Employers may be less sympathetic.
- Much of children's social life at primary school age revolves around what mothers organise. It may be more difficult to be involved in this circle as a dad, though not impossible.
- Fathering is often a rather private matter, compared with mothering. Men don't generally talk to each other about parenting in the way that women do, so it's likely that single fathers will find it harder to get the support they need.

Different kinds of families

Stepfathers

Although it is stepmothers who get such a bad press in children's stories, it is also very difficult to

step into the role of being father to children who are not your own. Stepfathers may find it hard to have 'fatherly' feelings and may worry about this. What is important, though, is to think about how the child feels and behave in a caring and appropriate way.

Of course, much depends on individual circumstances. Many children do have another dad as well, whether or not he is actually around very much, or at all. Feelings are likely to be even more powerful if the child's birth father has died.

It will come as no surprise that, at times of stress, children may use this as a weapon in family arguments.

It is important to respect the children's feelings about their birth father, and to be aware of how complicated this situation must be for them:

- If their father really does love them, why has he left them behind? From the child's point of view, all the rational explanations they are given for their father's absence may not have much impact on how it actually feels to be left. This may have a damaging effect on the child's self-esteem. They may also seek to blame their new stepfather for having pushed out their 'real' dad.
- The children may have mixed feelings about their birth father's new partner, and there may be all sorts of feelings of rivalry with new stepbrothers and sisters.
- A child may have a fraught relationship with their birth father.

So, you can see that becoming a stepfather is a really difficult role to take on. It needs a lot of tact to handle it well, and you will not always be able to get it right – even if only because the children may need someone to blame.

But – as with birth parents – what matters most of all is how well all this is sorted out together by the two people who are now the 'parental couple'. The children will need to know that whilst their stepfather cannot replace their birth dad, he does have a role in this new family as a father figure. He will need his partner's support in helping her children to accept this.

Of course, these difficulties don't always arise. Stepdads can bring a freshness to family situations, diluting tensions and creating the opportunity to find new solutions to old difficulties.

Adoptive fathers

Adoptive fathers will have had to undergo a thorough – and sometimes gruelling – process in order to become a father. This involves a considerable amount of self-examination and a need to confront personal issues that other fathers may never have to deal with. Some men find this difficult and feel that they have to prove themselves in a way that biological fathers may not have to. But it can also strengthen the bond between a father and his adopted child because he has a great self-awareness of his desire to be a parent and the choice he has made.

As children get older, they may ask questions about their birth parents that are difficult to answer. They may be curious about their birth families and want to find out more about them. They may want to meet them, maybe as a way of understanding more about the circumstances of their birth

from their own point of view.

Sometimes they may lash out at their adoptive fathers when they are hurt or angry.

Thinking of the child's curiosity about their genetic origins as absolutely natural can help fathers to tolerate feelings of rejection and hostility that may be hurtful and difficult to understand.

Foster fathers

Foster fathers are also likely to face complicated challenges. The circumstances that have brought a child into foster care range from a temporary difficulty in the family to serious problems in parenting – including physical or sexual abuse. The foster child may be coming into your home with a poor view of what fathers can offer to them.

It is essential and helpful to talk to the child's social worker to get as full a picture as you can of what they have been through. If you have some idea of what their experience of men has been, it will be easier not to take their suspicion, hostility, rejection (or indeed their seductiveness) too personally. This can help in tolerating the very difficult behaviour you are likely to have to manage.

Understanding may also help you to find tactful ways to talk to your foster child about how they are feeling. Your support worker, the children's social worker or a member of your local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Team may be able to help you with this delicate task.

Same sex fathers

Gay couples who choose to have children might be adoptive fathers who may or may not be the biological father, or foster fathers. It is worth remembering that gay fathers can face some complicated challenges that men in all these different kinds of families come up against.

A child's questions about their origins, including wondering about the mother who conceived and gave birth to them, are absolutely normal and it can be important to provide child friendly explanations in ways that are straightforward.

Finding ways to talk about any anxieties relating to being two dads and no mums can also be important.

Different worries may emerge at different stages of your child's development, particularly between fathers and their adolescent girls when there is no mum around, and it is important to think what your child is communicating as well as the different sensitivities all parents have. You might also worry your child will be picked on for having same sex fathers or experience prejudice yourselves.

It can be worth exploring what local parent groups exist as these can be a valuable source of support.

Helpful suggestions for fathers

The influence a good father has on his offspring is disproportionate to the actual time he spends with them. There is no formula for being a good father, but researchers have noticed what a difference it makes to children when a father is committed to them and encourages them in what

they do.

- As an expectant father, take up any opportunities to get involved in antenatal or parenting classes. It will make a difference to you and your baby if you are emotionally, as well as physically, prepared.
- It is not unusual for fathers of new babies to experience feelings of jealousy, exclusion, and 'having their nose put out of joint'. Sometimes the reasons are obvious: fathers are excluded from their infant's care or exclude themselves because they feel incompetent at looking after a tiny baby. But the reasons are not always obvious and may relate to the father's own history. Try and talk about your difficulties with your partner or someone else.
- However difficult it is to maintain contact as a separated father, your child will really benefit if you are consistent in taking an interest in them.
- Show your child that they are still very much in your mind even though you are living elsewhere. Remember special occasions, such as birthdays.
- As a lone father, accept any offers of help that come your way. It won't do you or your child any good to struggle on without support.
- Stepfathers sometimes get a bad press, but with thought and sensitivity you can make a positive contribution to the lives of your stepchildren.

About this leaflet

Understanding Childhood is a series of leaflets written by experienced child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapists to give parents, grandparents, carers and professionals additional insight into children's feelings and view of the world and to help make sense of their behaviour. Originally written for the Child Psychotherapy Trust they have been reviewed and updated and are now published by the ACP. The full series is available on the ACP website

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