

The Changing Role of Fathers

By John Hoffman



Not so long ago, a father's job was to bring home a pay cheque, cut the grass, fix things and tell the kids when they were misbehaving. There was a fairly strict dividing line between the roles of mothers and fathers. Now it's different. Families have changed in the past 25 years and male and female parenting roles are not as clear as they once were. Although the gap has narrowed, mothers still spend more time with children and working on domestic tasks than fathers do.

The idea that the average father spends only 20 minutes a day with his children has been exposed as a myth. Fathers are now involved in most aspects of child care, and on any given day, you can see fathers doing lots of things that once were considered the work of a mother - changing diapers, taking children to school and day care and even looking after children while their partner is at work. At the same time, more mothers are spending more time in the traditionally male domain of work outside the home.

While the roles of both fathers and mothers have changed, the two genders have experienced those changes in different ways. For mothers, the changes came about as a result of women wanting or needing to be more involved in the outside world of work and careers. For men, the changes came

about partly as a result of what women were doing. With mothers spending more time away from home, they had less time for at-home work including child care.

Therefore, fathers were needed to pick up the slack by spending more time looking after their children and doing housework.

One growing phenomenon in Canadian families is off-shifting, where mothers and fathers stagger their work time so as to be able to keep at least one parent at home caring for children while having the benefits of a second income. This is one way in which significant numbers of fathers have found themselves in the position of primary caregiver for at least certain hours during the day or week. In fact a small, but gradually increasing number of men have taken on the role of stay-at-home parent. Previously, psychologists and sociologists tended to look at parenting in terms of motherhood because mothers were usually the parents who spent the most time with children.

More recently, two factors have caused researchers to take a closer look at fatherhood. One factor is the increasing involvement of fathers in the lives of children. The other is the phenomenon of fatherlessness. Recent figures published by the U.S.-based National

Fatherhood Initiative indicate that 34 percent of American children do not live with their biological father. Of those children, 40 percent have not seen their father in the past year. (Unfortunately, there are no corresponding statistics for Canada although most observers believe that the fatherlessness problem is less acute in this country).

Much of the early research on fatherhood tried to establish the kind of contributions that fathers make to child development. Some studies, which have looked at children's long term development, have found that children who grow up with positively involved fathers are more empathetic, more likely to do well in school and less likely to engage in violent behaviour as youths.

Other studies have looked at father's parenting and play behaviour. Other researchers have documented (if we didn't already know from our own experience) that fathers and mothers hold babies differently and that fathers' style of playing with babies is different from that of mothers. Fathers tend to be more physical in their play, mothers more verbal.

Some researchers have suggested that these differences are very important to children's overall development. Mothers provide security and keep children close to them while fathers encourage exploration and serve to bring children out into the world.

However, human development is very complex and it is always difficult to isolate one factor, such as how a father plays Peek-a-boo, and be able to say that it caused a certain outcome in a child's

life.

Moreover, this fascination with mother-father differences may have overlooked the most important contribution that involved fathers make to their children, and that's that positive, involved fathering seems to help with the overall effective functioning of families.

Two of the leading American researchers in the area of fatherhood are Kyle Pruett, of Yale University and Michael Lamb, of the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development in Bethesda, Maryland. Pruett is conducting a long-term study of stay-home fathers. He has found that there seems to be a significant benefit to having the father do most of the hands-on daily care in the early years.

That's not because fathers do it better than mothers, it's because having a primary-caregiver father usually means that a child has two highly involved parents, which Pruett believes is good for children.

In addition, Lamb suggests that having an involved father, whether he's the primary caregiver or not, contributes to good teamwork and mutual support between mothers and fathers. "The most important issues about good fatherhood have to do with marital harmony," Lamb noted in a 1998 article in *Today's Parent* magazine.

Therefore, the unheralded benefit of involved fathering may simply be that it helps to promote an effective parenting partnership: two partners who support each other and are able to share the ups and downs of the parenting experience. That has to be good for kids.