

THERAPY MATTERS: Fatherhood Matters

By Sue Mayo and Helen Muscolo

“Maude, fetch me my slippers and a pipe and make sure the kids are quiet while I read the paper and drink my scotch!” My, how the times and roles of fathers in the family have changed in the past 70 years! While the above is a stereotypic description of fathers more than a half century ago, it is interesting to note that there can still be a bias about Dad being the breadwinner and Mom catering to her husband. The “modern family”, which is largely what we see today, eschews the old stereotype with dual income couples and a more equal division of labor. This was an evolutionary development that many believe has its roots in women leaving the home during World War II to work and support the war effort. While dads were usually hands off with regard to raising their children (with the exception of discipline – “wait until your father gets home!”), mothers coordinated the life of the household. Many children of this era had strong father figures but lacked emotional closeness to them.

Fast forward to the next generation of families, and the contrast in fathers’ involvement is markedly different. Most every father and mother wants to do a better job than their parents did for them and many fathers today will openly admit to desiring a closer relationship with their children than what they experienced in their own childhood. Dads today are “hands on” with the kids and in their free time they are found coaching their children’s little league teams and supervising homework, not reading the paper with scotch and pipe in hand. It is not unusual, in fact, to find dads fulfilling the role of “stay at home parent” as the economic crisis has resulted in job losses and often it is the woman who is serving as breadwinner for the family. The end result? More involved dads than ever before. In our therapy practice, we are having more and more fathers calling to discuss concerns about a child or initiate services. Men who generations ago wouldn’t be caught dead in the therapist’s office are eagerly sitting down with us to discuss behavior issues and parenting strategies for their sons and daughters.

We see this trend continuing in family court as well, where there has been a gradual shift away from the “Tender Years Doctrine” which dominated divorce proceedings for more than a century. The old bias of the tender years - wherein it was automatically presumed that the young child belonged with the mother and not with the father - has been replaced with the “Best Interests of the Child Doctrine” and the recognition that children benefit from having both parents actively involved in their upbringing. Dads today are not satisfied with once a week visits with their children or “weekend dad” status, and instead are actively seeking true joint custody and a strong participation in their children’s daily lives.

The fact is, fathers bring something unique to parenting and a healthy dose of both “mothering” and “fathering” leave children better off. A famous study on the ways in which mothers and fathers hold their babies discovered that mothers are more likely to hold their babies in such a way that the child’s face is pointing inward while fathers will hold them facing outward. We can still see the gender biases at play here, as mothers in general are thought of as the “softer” parent who offers nurturance, love, and comfort. Yet by holding their babies outward, dads are subtly encouraging their children to take in the world around them and actively engage. Dads teach their children to be go-getters, to be competitive, to explore. Study after study has linked father involvement with academic success, enjoyment of school, positive peer relationships, increased self-esteem, and overall achievement. Of particular importance is the impact that fathers can have on the self-esteem of pre-teen and adolescent girls. A father’s message to his teenage daughter – you are not only beautiful but are also smart, strong, and competent – is a powerful antidote to the negative societal influence that often results in a young girl’s plummeting self esteem as she attempts to find her way in a culture that appears to reward female sex appeal over brains.

So we write this today in honor of dads and the changing role of fatherhood. Today’s children are lucky indeed with the active involvement of both their mothers and their fathers. We remind dads to make sure to celebrate today with the people that honor you with the title “Dad”. If you live in or near Martinez, grab your kids and head on down to the Farmers Market to pick out the offerings for today’s dinner. How about a picnic down at the waterfront park? Bring along a football and don’t be afraid to teach your daughter to throw, along with your son. Take a walk with the family through the marshland, or maybe enjoy some old-fashioned fishing off the pier. Head on down to the King of the County BBQ Cook-off taking place today at the marina, and maybe stop by the bocce courts on your way home. Whatever you do and however you choose to celebrate, thank Dad for all he has done to be all the best he can be.

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