

Beyond Paternity to Parenting

by Carolyn Waterbury-Tieman

My husband and I were both working on doctoral degrees when our first son was born. We also had part-time jobs and were hundreds of miles away from our families. After waiting five years to have a baby, we were anxious to take care of him ourselves. A system of "tag-team parenting" evolved that allowed us to take care of our extrafamilial responsibilities as well as have individual and joint time with Douglas. The different reactions we received when we were out separately with our infant son were most interesting. While people would come up to me and comment on Douglas, they would stop Jerry and say things like, "Your wife sure is lucky you're willing to babysit," or "How nice that you're helping your wife out," or "Giving the wife a break, I see." The message was clear. When I had Douglas with me, I was doing my job, but when Jerry had him, he was doing me a favor.

The first few times we found these remarks amusing, but twenty-five years later we still hear the same thing. We both find this deeply disappointing. Why is it that when a father does what mothers have been doing for centuries, he's Superman, but a mother doing it is still 'just a mom'? These attitudes serve to perpetuate the stereotypic practice of equating 'parent' with 'mother' and minimize the profound significance of the father's role.

A growing number of fathers expect their parenting role to exceed the limits of paternity, financial support, and "roughhousing." The majority of men in recent studies report that they are more involved in childrearing than their fathers were and that they desire an equal partnership with their spouse in the rearing of their children. While including fathers in pregnancy and childbirth has been a tremendous improvement, it is not enough. It's ironic that hospitals go out of their way to involve fathers in labor and delivery, even inviting them to cut the umbilical cord, and then fail to require the father's presence when informing the mother about feeding, bathing, diapering, changing the umbilical cord dressings, etc. I'm pretty sure it's not because they assume the father already knows how.

Children need fathers to progress out of the delivery room into the nursery and beyond. How do we (and by we, I mean all of us, males and females) go about replacing the peripheral father with an all-inclusive version? Here are a few suggestions:

Changes in Language. Words are powerful. Through language we communicate our attitudes, beliefs, and expectations. As long as we continue to equate the word parent with mother, we are cheating fathers and children. When parenting books, magazines, or articles are clearly geared to a female audience, authors and publishers are suggesting that fathers need not read them. When letters asking for volunteers for school-related activities are addressed to mothers, the message is clear about who is expected to reply. So gentlemen, the subtle, yet persistent exclusion of fathers in the conversation about parenting suggests you are free to move out of the picture, emotionally and even physically. But if you accept the circumstances as inevitable and, therefore, permission to renege on your responsibilities as a parent, not only are you depriving your children, you are denying yourself the rich rewards of this role. When we can openly say to our sons, as they cuddle their teddy bears, comfort a sibling or friend, or care for a pet, "You're going to make a terrific father someday," we'll know the language of parenting has changed.

Changes in Attitudes and Expectations. The false impression that child care is something fathers occasionally do for mothers continues to prevail. In actuality, parenting is what fathers do with mothers for their children. Referring to fathers as babysitters is absurd. Babysitters are people who get paid to fill in for parents who are unavailable. Fathers, you are not temporary filler. You are the real thing. Seeing you fulfill your parental responsibilities in public, as well as private, should be treated as the norm, not a novelty. Parenting should be a mutual sharing of both the responsibilities and rewards of child rearing.

Men are not solely responsible for making the optional involvement of fathers acceptable. Many women lack a role model for a hands-on father. They have been socialized to believe that mothers should know all there is to know and do all there is to do with regard to child care. Otherwise they are not fulfilling their duty. Many of us fall into the trap of assuming there are only two ways of doing things - our way and the wrong way. When it comes to children, it is presumed mothers know "the right way." When fathers demonstrate competence in this arena, it can be threatening to a mother's self image. Fathers, if you face these situations, be patient, but persistent. Make it clear that your active participation is a statement about your desire to parent, not about your partner's ability to parent.

Changes in Actions. Wilhelm Busch reminds us, "To become a father is not hard. To be a father is, however." Any job worth doing is worth doing to the best of your ability. Parenting is no exception, whether you are male or female. In your efforts to become the father your children need you to be, take the time to: **Examine your sense of identity.** If your identity is all tied up in whether or not you are employed, what you are employed to do, where you are employed, and how much you earn, then your identity is extremely vulnerable to the unpredictability of the marketplace. If you look to your colleagues or employer to provide you with a sense of worth, you are forgetting that these people are primarily interested in what you can do and specifically, what you can do for them. In the eyes of your children, your value is not determined by the size of your paycheck. Children attribute the greatest power to those who are available to fulfill their needs - prepare their meals, participate in their play, provide comfort when they're hurt or ill, etc. The only place you are irreplaceable is at home. I have never heard of anyone expressing regret for not having spent more time at the office on their deathbed. **Conserve your energy.** Save some of the smiles, words of encouragement, patience and enthusiasm you demonstrate at the office for the people waiting for you at home. Utilize the time it takes you to travel home to mentally prepare yourself for the transition from your office work to your family work. Your children deserve the best of you, not the leftovers. **Get the training the job requires.** None of us is adequately prepared for the job of parenting. Few of us have had any formal training. The rest of us are limited to the parenting we received as kids - the models our parents provided. Many men do not feel good about the job their fathers did, but they don't know how to do any differently. Sometimes when people don't feel competent in a role, they simply avoid it. Don't allow your discomfort to rob you and your children of one of the most critical relationships in your lives. Take the initiative to learn more about becoming the father you want to be. Read, attend classes and workshops, or join a parenting group. Identify a father you really admire and ask him to be your mentor. Spend time discussing your joint parenting goals with your spouse. Just because you didn't give birth doesn't make you any less of a parent.

The fact is, you can't not parent. You can choose whether or not to become a parent or whether or not to be an involved parent. But if you have children, you cannot choose whether or not to parent. Your presence or absence will be experienced as parenting by your children. The way

your children experience your involvement in their lives, or lack thereof, has an extraordinary impact on what they come to believe about themselves and how they relate to the rest of the world. The relationships that children establish with their parents provide the foundation for every other relationship they will ever have.

As you celebrate Father's Day, take the time to reflect on what this role means to you, your children, your family, the future. The next time someone says, "How nice you're willing to babysit for your wife," boldly reply, "It's my job. I'm doing this for them. I'm a dad!"

Carolyn Waterbury-Tieman has degrees in Child Development, Family Studies, and Marriage and Family Therapy. She has been married for 29 years and has two sons. Waterbury-Tieman spent 15 years in various agencies and clinics as a family therapist and parent educator. Visit Carolyn at www.aparent4life.com, follow A Parent for Life on Facebook, or send questions and comments to parent4life@yahoo.com.