

Make Room for Daddy. Fathers Parent Differently from mothers, but what does that mean for our kids?

By John Hoffman

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When David Clarke asked a home daycare agency about becoming one of their caregivers, he got the runaround. Clarke, of Thornhill, Ontario, had been at home full-time with his children for several months, and before that had looked after them part-time for several years due to his irregular work schedule as a restaurant manager. But after several requests for an application form he realized that they weren't going to give him one – because he is a man. “They finally admitted that they didn't want me to go through the trouble and expense of fire and police checks and then not be able to place any children with me.”

Clarke didn't think this was fair and it wasn't – they could have at least given him the application form. However, the agency's concern about not being able to place children with him may have been well founded, and reflects the way our society often regards fathers – second best when it comes to caring for children. This is hardly surprising. Mothers have always been pre-eminent in this area. So it's going to take more than a generation or two of more involved-fathers to change attitudes.

That change may yet come. At least we are paying attention to dads these days – the media are reporting on them, divorced fathers are forming lobby groups and, in the U.S., policy-makers are looking for solutions to social problems associated with fatherlessness. Researchers are also studying fathers, and one of their main findings is (lo and behold!) that fathers tend to parent a little differently from mothers.

Social scientists have documented, among other things, that fathers handle babies differently, and that they tend to encourage independence and exploration while mothers tend to provide safety and intimacy. And, like Stephen Safranyos of Hamilton, Ontario, they tend to be more physical in their play. “Almost any time we're sitting on the floor, all I have to do is turn my back to the kids and I'm an instant jungle gym,” says the father of three. Although Safranyos and his wife, Cristina, share many parenting duties, rough-and-tumble play is his domain.

Some theorists, like David Blankenhorn, author of *Fatherless America*, believe that these differences are very important. At a fatherhood conference at York University last year, Blankenhorn argued that one reason we need more dads who are directly involved in the lives of their children is that children need both male and female influences for optimal development. This has sparked some debate but, in fact, many parents want to talk about similarities, not differences.

Jeff Bradshaw, of Mississauga, Ontario, acknowledges that some jobs have been divided along gender lines in his family. “Kim does the cooking,” he observes. “She likes it and she's good at it. I'm not. But I certainly don't think that some things are not for me

to do at all because I'm a man. Kim and I are not exactly the same, but I think to some extent we're interchangeable as parents."

Dan Blackburn, a father of three from Morinville, Alberta, puts it this way: "I don't think it matters at all if it's a man or a woman looking after the kids," he says. "There's a distinct difference in style between Sandee and me but the substance is virtually the same."

These fathers are going more on gut instinct than science, but it's interesting to note that North America's leading fatherhood researcher agrees with them. Michael Lamb is a psychologist and research scientist at the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development in Bethesda, Maryland, and some of his work has been used to illustrate the importance of male/female parenting differences. He says there is no evidence to support the idea that children need both a male and a female kind of parenting.

"The research about differences between mothers and fathers has been frequently misrepresented by the media," says Lamb. "There's a notion that kids somehow need to have this male type of interaction and then this female type and that those differences are essential to normal development. What children need most is lots of nurturing responsiveness, and it doesn't matter whether that comes from a male or a female."

Lamb's argument is not that mothers and fathers, or men and women for that matter, are the same. Clearly they are not (as if we needed research to tell us that), but Lamb says that gender alone does not account for the differences in parenting styles.

Part of it has to do with perspective. When you're home all day with your kids – and mothers are far more likely to be – you're intimately acquainted with all of their needs. (And indeed, it has been well documented that even more moms who work outside the home tend to bear most of the responsibility for their children). So you tend to look at your kids' immediate needs – who needs a bath, who's hungry, who might have a meltdown tonight because she skipped her nap – as part of the big picture. That leaves a little less room for fun and games. It's not that mothers don't play with their kids. It's just that horsing around is not as close to the surface when your main concern is keeping the family ship afloat.

David Clarke knows this. Since he's been at home full-time he's become aware of a broader scope of responsibilities. Part of that is keeping track of all things his children (aged two, four and six) will need from him that day. "Instead of thinking for one, I'm thinking for four," he says. "In my mind there's always something that needs to be done." Clarke doesn't believe it has altered his play style with his kids, but he's probably less of a play specialist that he might have been otherwise.

Safranyos notes that when it's time to get the kids dressed in the morning, he can sometimes find a way to get the job done that's more fun for them. "But I don't know if I'd be able to if I was the one doing it every day."

Researchers have noted that fathers who are the primary caregiver tend to act more “like mothers.” Tiffany Field, a psychologist at the University of Miami, found that stay-at-home dads imitated their babies’ facial expressions and talked in a high-pitched voice – behaviours we normally associate with mothers – more often than those who were secondary caregivers. We don’t know exactly why, but it could be because as primary caregivers they knew their babies better and therefore understood the need for this kind of intimate communication.

Still, guys are guys, including stay-at-home fathers. They parent like guys – in Field’s study the play style of the primary-care fathers was just as physical as other dads’ – and there’s nothing wrong with that. There may even be something good about it. Many researchers believe that the differences between men and women, particularly the way fathers who are good at playing catch, peekaboo and bouncing games with their babies had more cognitively advanced children than those dads who couldn’t keep their child’s interest in games.

There can be little doubt that this kind of play (handled properly and safely) is good for babies. It’s fun, it’s a healthy way of interacting and it helps to draw them out into the big, exciting world. And yes, babies have that kind of experience more often, but by no means exclusively, with their dad. But the question is, what was the most important factor? Was it specifically the father’s skill as a playmate? Or was that skill indicative of something more all-encompassing – a father who is tuned into and understands his child? In other words, a better parent?

Clarke-Stewart thinks the latter. She notes that there are many benefits when dads are involved with their children, but she doubts that male modes of interaction have that much to do with it. “We also did a three-year study [published in 1994] involving a group of preschoolers and, yes, we found that a father’s positive interaction improved a child’s cognitive development. But the particular fathering behaviour that was most predictive of good development was reading – not what most people would call a stereotypically male behaviour.”

She suggests that one reason positive father-child interactions keep showing up as beneficial is that there has been more variability in what fathers do (compared to mothers). In other words, more room for improvement. “Some fathers in previous generations were so minimally involved it makes sense that those who were substantially involved would make a difference that would show up in research.”

Here’s an example. Kyle Pruett, a psychiatrist at the Yale Child Study Center, is conducting a study that is following a small group of primary-caregiver fathers over a number of years. He is finding that the children in these families are doing very well, and he sees a significant benefit to having the father do most of the daily hands-on care in the early years. That’s not because fathers are better at it than mothers or because of a distinctive male influence. It’s because in two-parent families, having a stay-at-home father is more likely to ensure that both of a child’s parents are significantly involved. “The benefits arose from the presence of two parents who interacted well with each

other and with the child, not necessarily from the special cognitive or emotional stimulation from the father alone,” Pruett notes. One more possible explanation for the documented benefits of good, involved fathering: It helps mothers.

Jeff Bradshaw and his wife, Kim, can attest to that. “I often find that when one of us comes home in a bad mood the other, thank God, usually isn’t so we can sort off buffer each other. If Kim is the one in a bad mood, I’ll take the kids and deal with them so that she has a bit of space to relax and collect herself a little bit. She does the same thing for me sometimes.”

The Bradshaws also bounce parenting ideas off one another. “When we’re going through a difficult phase with one of our kids, our first approach to dealing with it is usually just reactive, and that isn’t always successful. Kim might say to me, ‘You know, this isn’t working. Let’s try something else.’ And because we’re both involved and we both know what’s happening, we can both come up with ideas”.

Michael Lamb thinks that this kind of teamwork and mutual support is an important way that involved fathers contribute to the well-being of their family. “The most important issues about good fatherhood have to do with involvement and, perhaps even more important, marital harmony,” he says. “The stylistic differences that have been observed between mothers and fathers are real. I don’t think they’re particularly important but they’re not bad, either. I hope all parents would feel free to interact with their children in a way that is comfortable to them.”

Indeed, the importance of the difference between moms and dads is a matter for debate, but the distinction is noticeable, even to children, no matter how hard we try to obscure it. To illustrate this, Alison Clarke-Stewart relates a story about some friends who did everything possible to share all child-rearing duties equally. “Some gender differences did emerge, but they were about as equal as I can imagine it’s possible to be.” And indeed, their baby learned to see both parents as a source of both nurturing and fun. But as a toddler, when she was sad or tired, the child would go to either parent and call that parent “Mommy.” When she wanted to play, she would go to either and call that parent “Daddy.”