

Male Bonding. When dads and babies build a strong relationship, everybody wins.

by John Hoffman

Originally published in Today's Parent, April 2005

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Shortly after I became a dad, I was convinced I had uncovered a great secret. The secret was that it felt good — astonishingly good at times — to look after and feel very close to a baby. One memory stands out. I was sitting listening to some gentle harp music as one of my boys melted into my chest. I thought to myself, “Man, this is one of the best things a human being could ever do. Do guys know about this?”

Of course, it wasn't really a secret, not to mothers anyway. I was merely experiencing a normal phenomenon that happens when a parent spends a lot of time with a baby. I'll call it attachment. For me, attachment was not just how the baby responded to me. It was how I responded to him and was always drawn back, even when things didn't go well (and I hasten to acknowledge that looking after babies is not all bliss and joy). I wasn't the first man to experience this, I'm sure, but I'd never heard any father talk about it.

And we should talk about it. We need to understand father-child attachment because it's an increasingly crucial factor in today's families.

Throughout history, in virtually all cultures, mothers have had primary responsibility for the care of young children. However, few societies have expected women to shoulder this burden alone. Most have had a system — often a network of female friends, relatives and neighbours — to support them.

Ottawa mother Maithreyi Ramanathan grew up in south India, where she says that, typically, a mother goes to her own mother's house when she is eight months pregnant and doesn't return until the baby is three or four months old. When Ramanathan was pregnant in Canada with her son Sanjay (now 11/2), her grandmothers were genuinely worried. “How could you do this on your own? Who's going to help you?’ they asked. I told them my husband would,” she says. ““But what good is a man's help?’ they asked.”

Her grandmothers couldn't have appreciated that in today's North America, parenting takes place in more isolated nuclear families, often far removed from extended family members and without the support of once ever-present neighbours who now head off to work each day. In that context, a father's effective early involvement is arguably a necessity.

Here's where attachment comes into the equation. A father can assist his partner or care for his kids out of a sense of duty. That's a good place to begin, but is duty enough to sustain his involvement in a society that still acts, at least on some level, as if child care is women's work?

Listen to Tim Dumonceaux talk about the feeling he gets from having one of his kids asleep on his shoulder: “This is what I get out of parenting,” says the father of three from Saskatoon. “That feeling — that this little human being is so comfortable with me that I can be his bed. It’s like candy. I can’t get enough of it.”

That’s the difference between “I have to” and “I want to.” A father who wants to be with his kids has a much better chance of becoming, and staying, effectively involved.

Dumonceaux recalls the night two-month-old Gabrielle fell asleep on his shoulder while he and his wife watched a movie. “I don’t remember much about the movie. I was watching her, ” he says. Holding sleeping infants is by no means the only way for fathers to find this gut-level sense of connection, but the point is, he’s not just giving, he’s getting. Yes, his involvement will enhance his child’s development at some future date, but it’s also providing something good for him right now.

How Attachment Happens

Babies were designed to draw us to them. It’s the way they look, feel and smell. It’s the full-body smile as a five-month-old wriggles with delight when he sees his father enter the room. Those are the moments when it’s as if little baby Cupid arrows embed themselves in your skin so the baby can reel you in. Becoming attached is largely about getting enough time with a baby to allow that to happen.

In fact, anthropologist Barry Hewlett sums up the key to father attachment in two words: quantity time. “Many developmental psychologists have emphasized the importance of quality time for parents who spend less time with their children than in previous generations,” Hewlett says. “But quantity time matters too.”

Hewlett, a professor at Washington State University, has been studying fatherhood ever since he did his doctoral dissertation in the 1980s on the infant care provided by fathers in the Aka culture, a hunter-gatherer group who live in the forests of central Africa. Aka fathers are more involved with babies than those of any other culture Hewlett knows of. They spend about half the day either holding or within arm’s length of their babies.

He’s not suggesting that North American fathers should or can play the same kind of role. But there are two lessons here. One is that mother and father roles, though influenced by biology, are not determined by biology. They can be whatever a culture (or a family) needs them to be. The other supports Hewlett’s contention about quantity time: The Aka fathers are competent, comfortable caregivers because they spend so much time at it.

“Psychologists and doctors talk about how sensitive and responsive parenting helps a child develop a sense of trust and security,” says Hewlett. “Certainly, but in order to parent in a way that is sensitive to your child’s needs, you have to truly know your child.” With babies, the first step is to get involved with routine care, not just because your partner needs the help (although she does), but because that’s how you get to know your baby.

Richard Gehl had little choice but to become involved after his first child was born five years ago, when both he and his partner, Michelle, were 18 years old. Michelle was suffering from postpartum depression so Gehl spent more than the usual father proportion of time in charge: diapering, comforting, bathing and feeding. "At first I was afraid of doing something wrong," says the father of two from Regina, "but it got to feel more natural after a while."

Right. In learning to be a competent parent there is no substitute for hands-on experience. The more time an adult and baby spend together, the more they have a chance to discover each other. That's how attachment is born.

The Dad Difference

Mark Smith sits on the couch reading the newspaper. Nine-month-old Andrew decides he wants Dad's attention. He abandons his toys, crawls over to the coffee table, pulls himself up and waits for Dad to notice him. Dad lowers his newspaper...and growls. He bangs the table once. Twice. The boy giggles. Dad gets on the floor and assumes a posture of playful menace. "I'm gonna get you!" Andrew squeals with adrenalin-laced delight and scrambles to the other side of the table. The game is on.

Andrew is now four (Smith has three other children, ranging from three to 14), but boisterous play is still a big part of the picture for this father from Kamloops, BC. "Yeah, I love to get down and dirty and wrestle with the kids," he says. "They love it too." So did mine. My kids and I spent hours trying to throw each other off the bed in a game we called Over the Falls.

This kind of interaction exemplifies the way in which a father's attachment style may differ from that of a mother, says Daniel Paquette, an associate professor in the psychology department at the University of Montreal. "Typically, the mother-child attachment relationship is primarily aimed at calming and comforting children in times of stress," says Paquette. "The father's activation relationship [Paquette's term for father-style attachment] is developed primarily through physical play and it serves a different function. Rough-and-tumble play helps children to be open to the world, braver in unfamiliar situations, and helps them develop positive competition skills."

Michael Lamb is not so sure. The psychology professor at Cambridge University in England, was among the first to scrutinize distinctions between mother and father interaction styles back in the 1970s. "I once thought these differences were important for child development, but I no longer think that," says Lamb. "In large part, the factors that make father-child interaction positive are very similar to what makes mother-baby interaction positive. That means being responsive and sensitive, learning to read a baby's cues and give the baby what she needs."

Paquette says he's not trying to assign strict roles to mothers and fathers. "Certainly, mothers provide more than comfort and fathers can be more than playmates," Paquette says. "The point is that children need both kinds of interaction."

In other words, rough-and-tumble play is more than just goofing off. Well, it is goofing off, but it can also be a kind of intimate interaction that helps dads and kids connect.

Mommy Makes Three

All of this wonderful quantity and quality daddy time affects mothers. Likewise a mother can have considerable influence over the type of relationship a father has with his children. “You can’t really see the father-child relationship without the context of the mother-child relationship,” says Hewlett.

When Sanjay was a newborn, Ramanathan’s modern-thinking, Canadian-born husband, David Stone, expected and wanted to be involved in baby care. “I knew right away that I would need his help and I welcomed it,” she says. Even so, at first Ramanathan found it hard to leave David alone with Sanjay even for a few minutes. “I’d say, ‘I’ll be downstairs,’” she recalls. “But I didn’t really go downstairs. I stayed right there and kept an eye on them.”

Ramanathan’s feelings were likely heightened because of her cultural background, but it’s a normal new mother reaction. Our blurring of gender roles notwithstanding, most new mothers still feel, on some level, that “This is my job, and can this guy do it right?” In some cases, this kind of feeling can set off a dynamic that I call the competence gap. The mother gains baby care skills quickly (she has no choice) and, as her skills increase, the father, whose skill level usually develops more slowly because he gets fewer cracks at taking care of the baby, falls farther and farther behind. It’s hard to find his way in. He may withdraw to avoid feeling incompetent or because he thinks his efforts are unappreciated. Mom becomes more and more indispensable and starts to resent her partner’s lack of involvement. None of this, of course, is good for father attachment.

Some researchers have labelled this gatekeeping. But I think the bigger issue is that women are still getting used to us big hairy males elbowing our way into the territory of baby care and doing things like a guy. We men don’t have the social history of father involvement in baby care that helps us feel totally certain that it’s our job too — if you’re really sure you should be doing it, you’re less likely to be defeated by a small failure or rebuff. Nor do we have the experience that tells us how to go about it in a way that doesn’t threaten our partners. So we’re figuring it out as we go along.

Some men do this very well. David Stone must have because his wife got used to him caring for Sanjay. “It just took time and seeing over and over again that David was good at caring for Sanjay — giving him baths, changing him. He became as good at it as I was.”

The bottom line here is that both mothers and fathers need to bend a bit. Fathers need to keep trying, and mothers need to give them some space. Fathers also need to recognize and support the mother-child attachment which is so important to the whole family. A man’s positive involvement and support and his strong relationships with his children can, in fact, enhance a woman’s capacity to mother.

So what's the secret to father-child attachment? Time, patience, experience and lots of physical contact — you know, like a few good games of Over the Falls.