No Man's Land

We're finally past the patronizing ideas about the new involved dad. Now we're into uncharted territory. by John Hoffman
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It wasn't supposed to be funny. A roomful of social workers, psychologists and family services manager-types (plus one writer) had been split into two groups. Our task was to design a Saturday morning program for fathers, using as a model an existing one called Parent/Child Mother Goose. What would we call it? How would it be different from the mothers' group? As we politely debated, I was picking up fragments of a deadly earnest conversation taking place across the room. Most words were garbled, but I could make out isolated phrases. At one point there was talk about male penguins incubating eggs on their feet. A minute later someone was explaining how seahorse fathers carry babies in their pouches. I caught the eye of the man across from me. "What are they talking about?" we asked silently.

A little later we got to see each other's flip charts, which provided some tantalizing glimpses of the other group's struggle to come up with a name. Parent/Child Father Goose didn't cut it, apparently: "Redesigning mothers' program for fathers. Not a good idea," it said on the sheet. To the left, encircled, was the word "Seahorses." The other side bore a similarly unadorned notation: "Penguins. Feet. Egg." Then the whole thing was crossed out with a big, decisive-looking X, above which, in bold letters, were the words "The Lion King."

Huh?

Apparently there had been some tussle about an appropriate symbol of involved fathering. The handful of nurturing-father images from the animal kingdom had been shot down as phony, feminized male imagery. But The Lion King? Perhaps they (rightly) surmised that men wouldn't come to a group called Seahorses and Penguins.

It's a little mean to tell tales out of school, but this odd exercise is an example of the mental handstands people do in the name of defining, understanding, supporting and promoting involved fatherhood.

We have been talking about the "new involved father" for something like a quarter century, and the discussion has finally gone beyond the superficial celebration of wonderful, unhairy, New Age dads who are cutting umbilical cords and walking around with babies in Snuglis. Now we're on to the hard part.

Now we need to think about how social and family services can be more inclusive of men. We must reconsider the language and images used in parent-education materials. We need to talk about how mothers and fathers can learn to share parenting territory, which has traditionally been divided along gender lines. We must decide if including fathers means we think mothers and fathers are equal in every respect, and what that might imply.

It's becoming political. Not in the sense that we have a Fathers' International Party (the Fippies?), but lobby groups for divorced fathers were successful in getting the federal government to establish a committee to look into custody and access. The hearings were, by all accounts, fractious and emotional. There were catcalls, attempts to shout people down and accusations of bias.

Charges of sexism against men have become more common. Last November, at a national conference on fatherhood in Montreal, a female family mediator denounced - not criticized, but denounced - the National Longitudinal Study on Children and Youth because it asked questions only of mothers. Later, when the floor was open for questions, the discussion was hijacked by a succession of divorced fathers who decried politicians, divorce laws, lawyers, the school system, feminists and everything else that blocks fathers out of kids' lives. As one guy rambled on and on, several of us were calculating which way we would dive if he pulled a gun.

A less strident kind of politicking can be found in the seahorses incident, which was part of a father-consciousness process undertaken by Family Resource Programs of Canada, an umbrella group for parent/child resource centres, toy libraries and family support programs. That wasn't exactly a pitched battle, but the discussion was driven by a new idea: You can't just take services for moms, slap the father tag on them and present them as programs for dads. Family services must recognize this as they strive to invent the kind of program that fathers will actually attend.

Resource centres were set up for mothers by mothers, most staff are female and most programming is centred around the needs of women. If men are going to be more involved as parents, resource centres should embrace them. And they know that - that's why they had a meeting of fatherhood specialists in Montreal. That's why a male consultant was going around eastern Ontario conducting sessions to sensitize female staff to fatherhood issues. For example, he explained, men respond to social services differently - they're action oriented as opposed to process oriented. But there's another, more problematic issue: The idea that involved fatherhood is a positive factor in a child's life can be threatening to some single mothers and people who work with them.

In a session I attended, one participant kept tripping over the "but he might be a bad guy" issue, one that hovers, often unspoken, around the edges of many conversations about involved fatherhood: Surely we don't want a father's participation if he's abusive. In other words, "If I endorse involved fatherhood, am I opening the door for those aÃƒÂ?holes to exert even more control over the lives of women?" The people who work with at-risk families see a good deal of negative male control; talk about more involvement makes them uneasy.

Just by the careful way Ed Pitt chooses his words, you can tell he has encountered territorial issues in his work as the co-director of the Fatherhood Project of the Families and Work Institute in New York City. "When I started going around the country talking to people about the opportunities for father involvement, I thought the idea would be

welcomed." However, the response Pitt often got was more along the lines of, "Is this going to affect the way we work with mothers?"

"At the time, the prevailing attitude in daycare centres, family services, child welfare and schools was that parenting issues were women's issues," Pitt explains. "Training, recruitment and staffing were oriented around the idea that they would be serving mothers. I simply wanted to interject the notion of educating fathers and involving them in these services a little." To Pitt it seemed obvious that this could benefit children, and mothers as well. But he quickly learned that these organizations had a comfort level in working with women that was hard to let go of. "Bringing fathers into the picture was introducing a foreign element. They weren't used to that."

Territory is political, as Charlotte Cooper found when she and some colleagues made a fatherhood video in 1995. Cooper, a social worker who deals with parents of premature babies at the Peterborough Regional Health Centre in Ontario, thought the video would educate both fathers and staff about the ways men could participate in the care of their children. She ran into ambivalence and discomfort that surprised her. "We'd set up a time to come and interview the dad and some of the moms would say, 'And what will I be doing?'" Cooper says. "When I'd explain that we were just going to interview her husband, some seemed to wonder why they wouldn't be part of it." Why were fathers the focus of the video when mothers had generally been most highly involved in the care of these babies?

It's tempting to position this as some kind of female conspiracy, but it goes both ways. Because, as much as women are unsure of how to bring men into their territory, most men are just as uncertain of what they want to do when they get there. "Staff who were used to working with mothers were starting to see more fathers wanting to participate in the baby's care," says Cooper, who adds that dads are now a welcome and expected part of care at hospitals. "But at first, the fathers weren't sure exactly what their role was, and the staff had to learn how to respond to them."

Pitt sees this dynamic in many young middle-class, two-parent families. "I believe that most men are performing in the way they think they are expected to," he says. "And most of the time, the roles have been either formally or informally agreed to. However, usually the mother will say she'd like her husband to be more involved. But when you ask her exactly how she wants him to be involved, she's not quite sure."

That's bang on for Christine van Ringen-Oke of Calgary. She and her husband always had an unspoken understanding that both would be involved in the care of their daughter, but Christine has had more trouble sharing the turf than she expected. "When Tristan was tiny I found it very hard to let Jason have any kind of authority over her," she admits. "When she was crying, I wanted to be the comforter. I felt like I was the only one who could do it right. I felt like it was my job."

Jason's perception is that Christine applies a different standard to Tristan's upsets when he's looking after her. "If Christine is with the baby and she bumps her head a bit,

Christine will say, 'Oh, you're all right.' But if I'm with Tristan she comes more quickly. Tristan will fall and start crying and I'll think she can maybe shake it off. But then Christine comes and takes her off to comfort her." She knows he finds it frustrating, and they both know that this undermines Jason's developing ability to comfort Tristan. "I think I'm sabotaging him, to be honest," Christine says. "I'm not doing it because I want him to feel that way, but somehow it helps me feel in control. It gives me some self-worth. It's one thing that I own."

This may sound like a control freak talking, but it's more likely just an honest mom. In our zeal to encourage involved fatherhood, we've underestimated the psychological importance for women of being the primary caregiver. Motherhood is not simply having babies and breasts. And it's not just looking after kids more than men. As a female friend once put it, "It's a state of being. It's a complete surrendering of your life to your children. Women do that, and they have no choice really. But, with a few exceptions, I don't see men doing that. Men get involved and care about their children, but they're still thinking, 'What about my life?' For mothers, no matter what else you might do, this is your life."

It's partly that women are socially programmed and pressured to perform as parents, but there's more than that. It also feels good. It feels good to be able to meet your children's needs, to look after them well. It's a kind of power, not in the sense of being the boss, but more like realizing that you have a profound effect on the life of little people. And it will be no easier for women to share this power than it was for men to share the power that they had (and still have, many would argue). If you let someone else experience that power too, does that erode your own - and, ultimately, your importance as a mother?

The "this kid's life depends on me" mentality that women have is why - even when parents work hard at being equal - there's usually a big difference between a mother's world view and a father's. A common mother's complaint is that there are so many things men don't notice. Jennifer Landels, a mother of three in Richmond, BC, puts it like this: "We sorted out most of our family politics with our first child. We had differences in parenting styles early on, which seem to have disappeared. He's even better at some things, like rocking babies to sleep. One remaining point of contention for me, and for a lot of my mom friends, is that no matter how many physical tasks dads take on, it's moms who do the mental organizing. We keep track of the minutiae of life: library books that need to go back, doctor's appointments, shopping, meal prediction, anticipating wet diapers." Her husband, Chris Richardson, must tread carefully in Landels' realm, even worrying about what food he can take for lunch and what's being saved for a picky eater. "I've developed fridge paranoia," he admits.

As fathers try to get comfortable in their role, they do so without the supports women had when moving into traditionally male worlds. The women's movement had many factions but also a number of shared goals and common ideologies. The involved fatherhood movement has neither. Men did not storm the Bastille of female privilege, demanding to change more diapers. It's more like they were pulled in by women.

Women wanted natural childbirth so their husbands became labour coaches. Women wanted to work outside the home, so they needed men to do more on the domestic front. And when the guys who willingly took up the challenge faced obstacles, they didn't have slogans ("I am Dad, hear me purr!") or spokesmen to reinforce that they were doing the right thing. Nor did they have brotherhood. As Chris Richardson says, "The mothers get together regularly at playgroup and let the kids loose and talk about stuff," he says. "I'm not comfortable with that, so I find it very difficult to relate my experience to that of another father."

All the while, men continue to face obstacles at work, where it is still assumed that the demands of a father's career should take precedence over his children, while more allowances, formal and informal, are made for mothers. They face a society where most people, deep down, still act as if children are a female issue.
Having said all that, it would be wrong to suggest that nothing has changed. Things have, and the evidence is all around us. Often changes in fathers' attitudes and behaviour are driven by circumstance. Tim Paquette says that his hands-on involvement was simply a family necessity. "I knew that my wife would be going back to work," says the father of two from Ottawa. "It was obvious that she couldn't, by herself, carry the full burden of child care along with her paid job. It wasn't humanly possible." So Paquette's involvement was assumed, but, like many of his contemporaries, he was uncomfortable at first. "It's different going from man to father than it is going from woman to mother. Sandii was socialized to be a mother. All society really showed me was the breadwinner role."

When their daughter, Arianna, was one month old, a close relative of Sandii died and she had to go away to the funeral for a weekend without the baby. Paquette was faced with being sole caregiver to an infant - and he did just fine. "That was my test case, I guess," he says. "It showed me I could do it. And it gave Sandii confidence in my parenting ability."

Few fathers will have this kind of jump-start. If anything will really make dads' involvement work it won't be social policy, gender-neutral parenting materials or a culture that values involved fatherhood, although we need all those things. What will make it stick is fathers themselves - when they experience not just love of their kids (they already do that), but the deep feelings that come from looking after and being part of the lives of children.

On Grey Cup day last fall, Richardson was alone in the house with his 18-month-old twin daughters while his wife was out. He was idly watching the game when Eleanor woke up from a nap. "She was inconsolable," he remembers. Richardson went to her, scooped her up, carried her downstairs and settled in with her on the couch. She fussed for a while but eventually he rocked her back to sleep, something he's always been good at. "I wasn't really inclined to take her back to her room. It felt good to have her sleeping in my arms." On one hand, this was an entirely ordinary experience - mothers do it every day all over the world. But on another level, it's incredibly powerful - the

ability to have a significant impact on another life. And it's also deeply satisfying: I may not be the king of the world, but I can make this little kid feel better.

I think Chris Richardson felt a bit of that power. And I think he liked it.