

Fathers, Get Involved!

By David L. Smoot, Ph.D.

I recently read a study by the National Fatherhood Initiative (NFI) that lamented the rising number of incompetent fathers depicted in typical children's television programs. I was alarmed not only by the examples of bungling Dads on the airwaves but also by the claim by NFI that four out of every ten children in America live without their biological father, and three of ten live in homes without any father at all. NFI argued that, by the time children are 6 years old, they will have spent more time watching TV than they will spend talking with their fathers in their lifetime!

Unfortunately, many fathers spend minimal time in direct contact with their children even when they live within the same household. Fathers time at work competes most seriously with time for children. Studies show that the average work week has steadily increased over the years. Many fathers travel away from home several days a week and their children become more accustomed to seeing their father with a suitcase than with a baseball glove.

Some fathers immerse themselves more completely in work after the birth of children. For some, this is an instinctive reaction to the increased responsibility of providing for the family. While mothers often gravitate toward increased caregiving responsibilities, some fathers view their work as their chief contribution to the family. Still others feel uncomfortable with the new responsibilities and challenges of parenthood and retreat into the more predictable world of work with known standards and achievable rewards. Finally, some fathers feel slighted and hurt because they sense their wives have less time and energy for them as they devote more time to their caregiving role for the infant.

As wonderful as mothers are for young children, the children of today's society clearly need active fathers in their lives as well. Some argue that fathers are more important when the children -- especially boys -- reach the teen years. However, teens often reject a father's sudden attempts to set limits if the father has not taken an active role throughout the child's life. Nevertheless, active fathers play a major role in socializing young children.

In my review of fathering literature, I find three factors that enable a father to fulfill an active role in his children's lives. These factors are: Availability, Shared Responsibility and Intimacy, and Comfort with Self and Others.

Availability is obviously important as it is difficult for a father to work 80 hours a week and have time or energy to interact with his children. By the same token, fathers who devote most of the weekend to golf have little free time for their children. Studies have shown that fathers who work fewer hours spend more time in caregiving activities with their children. Fathers need to make child-raising a priority and devote regular time to be with their children. Unless the commitment is made, work demands will always tyrannically eat up more of the hours.

Shared Responsibility and Intimacy refers to teamwork and closeness between spouses. Fathers who are willing to adopt less traditional beliefs about the division of labor at home and in child-raising are more likely to be involved with their children. A more

egalitarian philosophy on household and child-rearing responsibilities predicts more involvement by fathers regardless of whether mothers work outside the home or not. Also, mothers who report greater marital satisfaction and intimacy tend to have partners who are more involved with the children's activities.

Finally, **Comfort with Self and Others** seems to predict greater involvement of fathers with their children. Fathers who are comfortable with themselves and report higher self-esteem show a greater likelihood of being active figures in their children's lives. Conversely, those who are depressed, stressed, or lack confidence seem to withdraw from family life in general, and from their children in particular. Some studies show that a father's comfort with children generally predicts the amount of time devoted to parenting. On average, fathers are more likely to be actively involved with their sons than they are with their daughters. This may reflect a greater comfort and similar interests with boys relative to girls.

In summary, fathers are desperately needed by the youth of today. In my experience, most fathers want to make this commitment, but may simply not know how to start. I would suggest 1) making an intentional commitment to be there for your family. Yes, your work is an important contribution, but your presence and time are appreciated even more! 2) take the time to nurture your marital relationship and consider the most effective way to share responsibilities. Children truly need a parent team that can act as one, and 3) examine any obstacles you may have to feeling comfortable with yourself and others – especially your children. Children typically hold their fathers in high esteem. In fact, if you can see yourself as your children probably see you, confidence and comfort should be no problem!