

THE DEVELOPING CHILD



Fatherhood

Ross D. Parke

SERIES EDITORS

Fatherhood

Ross D. Parke

Harvard University Press
Cambridge, Massachusetts
London, England
1996

Copyright © 1981, 1996 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Parke, Ross D.

Fatherhood / Ross D. Parke.

p. cm. — (The developing child series)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-674-29517-X (cloth : alk. paper).

ISBN 0-674-29518-8 (paper : alk. paper)

1. Fatherhood. 2. Fathers. 3. Father and child. I. Title. II. Series:

Developing child.

HQ756.P379 1996

306.874'2—dc20

95-49647

THE DEVELOPING CHILD

Recent decades have witnessed unprecedented advances in research on human development. In those same decades there have been profound changes in public policy toward children. Each book in the Developing Child series reflects the importance of such research in its own right and as it bears on the formulation of policy. It is the purpose of the series to make the findings of this research available to those who are responsible for raising a new generation and for shaping policy in its behalf. We hope that these books will provide rich and useful information for parents, educators, child-care professionals, students of developmental psychology, and all others concerned with the challenge of human growth.

Jerome Bruner

New York University

Michael Cole

University of California, San Diego

Annette Karmiloff-Smith

Medical Research Council, London

SERIES EDITORS

The Developing Child Series

- The Caring Child*, by Nancy Eisenberg
Child Abuse, by Ruth S. Kempe and C. Henry Kempe
Children Drawing, by Jacqueline Goodnow
Children Solving Problems, by Stephanie Thornton
Children's Friendships, by Zick Rubin
Children's Talk, by Catherine Garvey
The Child's Discovery of the Mind, by Janet Wilde Astington
Daycare, Revised Edition, by Alison Clarke-Stewart
Distress and Comfort, by Judy Dunn
Early Language, by Peter A. de Villiers and Jill G. de Villiers
Early Literacy, by Joan Brooks McLane and Gillian Dowley
McNamee
The First Relationship: Infant and Mother, by Daniel Stern
Infancy, by Tiffany Field
The Learning-Disabled Child, by Sylvia Farnham-Diggory
Mental Retardation, by Robert B. Edgerton
*Mind and Media: The Effects of Television, Video Games, and
Computers*, by Patricia Greenfield
Mothering, by Rudolph Schaffer
The Perceptual World of the Child, by T. G. R. Bower
Play, Enlarged Edition, by Catherine Garvey
The Psychology of Childbirth, by Aidan Macfarlane
Schooling, by Sylvia Farnham-Diggory
Sisters and Brothers, by Judy Dunn

To my wife, Barbara, and our children,
Gillian, Timothy, Megan, Sarah, Jennifer,
and Zachary, all of whom have taught
me about fathering

Acknowledgments

A number of students and colleagues contributed in important ways to my research program at the University of Wisconsin, the Fels Research Institute, the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, the University of Illinois, and most recently the University of California, Riverside. Their work is acknowledged throughout the book. My own research in this volume has been supported by grants from a variety of agencies: The Grant Foundation, the National Foundation March of Dimes, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the National Science Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, the University of California, Riverside, the Graduate School of the University of Illinois, and the Fels Fund of Philadelphia. This book was completed while I was on a sabbatical, which was supported by the University of California, Riverside, and a fellowship from the James McKeen Cattell Fund.

Several scholars provided useful critiques of early versions of the book, including Andrew Cherlin, Scott Coltrane, Carolyn and Philip Cowan, John Gottman, and Barbara Tinsley. Elizabeth Gretz edited the final draft with insight and skill. Karin Horspool and Tracy Bunker did a fine job in preparing the manuscript. A special

thanks to my wife, friend, and colleague, Barbara Tinsley, for her continuing support, advice, and insight during all of my endeavors. Finally, I want to express my thanks to other father researchers and to the many families who have consented to be studied to help us learn about fathers and fathering.

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
1 / Fatherhood: Myths and Realities	1
2 / The Transition to Fatherhood: Pregnancy and Birth	17
3 / Fathers' Involvement: Infancy and Beyond	44
4 / What Determines Fathers' Involvement?	73
5 / Socialization and Sociability	119
6 / Intellectual Development	156
7 / Divorce, Custody, and Remarriage	179
8 / Innovations in Fathering	224
Notes	259
Suggested Reading	313
Index	315

1 / Fatherhood: Myths and Realities

A famous anthropologist once said that fathers are a biological necessity, but a social accident. Throughout much of the present century and all of the last, our culture has conformed comfortably to this view. Traditionally, fathers have been portrayed as uninvolved in child care—pacing the waiting room floor during childbirth, never changing a diaper or warming a bottle, and generally steering clear of the nursery, leaving the responsibility for child rearing almost entirely up to their wives. Specialized to their role as family breadwinner, these mythical fathers provided a strong but distant model for their children and moral and material support for their wives. Otherwise, these fathers truly were something of a social accident, and hardly active participants in the rearing of their children.

Whether this stereotype of the uninvolved father ever actually existed in large numbers is debatable. Several historians have recently argued that the traditional portrait of the uninvolved father is, at best, oversimplified.¹ Over the past century, certainly, there has been a continuing tension between forces that pull for greater participation and opposing influences that push for restraint and uninvolvedness. Today and probably in earlier eras as well, there is no single type of father. Some fathers

remain uninvolved, others are active participants, and some fathers are even raising children by themselves.

A variety of technological, economic, and ideological changes in our society are redefining what it is to be a father. Whether for reasons of personal fulfillment or economic necessity, more women today work full time outside the home than ever before. Women are also returning to work sooner after the birth of a child. Fathers are taking on more responsibility for early infant and child care. At one time, kin and clan—that supportive network of aunts and grandmothers—could be relied on to help in the care of children as well. Today, the nuclear family is much more isolated because of the high geographic mobility that our economy requires. Legal decisions have also affected fathers; more divorced fathers than in the past are assuming or sharing custody of their children. All of these changes have made it more common for fathers to take an active part in rearing their children.

It is, of course, no accident that just as fathers have moved into a breach created by social circumstances, a new ideology of fatherhood has begun to make inroads into the old stereotype. No longer is the father with a diaper pin in his mouth a comical figure. The ideal father of the newest fashion goes to childbirth class with his wife, coaches her through labor, attends her during delivery, and shares in the care and feeding of the infant, especially when his wife returns to work. A new cultural image of fatherhood has emerged that has pushed aside the earlier portrait of the uninvolved father. No longer a social accident, many fathers are active partners in parenting and a direct influence on their children's development.

Although it is important to correct earlier myths about reluctant and uninvolved fathers, it is equally critical to

examine how closely the new cultural ideal matches the reality of fathers' actual involvement. Just how involved the modern father has truly become and the consequences of this involvement for his children, for his wife, for the life of the family, and for himself are issues that will be addressed in this book. In the last twenty years, psychologists and other researchers, undoubtedly stimulated by the new popularity of fathering, have examined a long list of questions concerning how involved fathers are with their children, how fathers actually behave with their children, and what effects this behavior seems to have on the children's development. The picture that emerges may be somewhat surprising and perhaps disappointing. In fact, the amount of change in fathers' involvement has not been as dramatic as current cultural images would lead us to believe. There is less a sense of a father revolution than a slow but steady evolution toward a new conception of fathers and their roles in the family and society. Why is change so slow and so difficult to achieve? What are the determinants or impediments to changing a father's role in the family and with his children? In order to understand fathers' impact on children, we need to better understand the pushes and pulls that govern fathers' involvement. In spite of the modest pace of change, it is now clear that fathers can play an important and unique role in the development of the child.

We will look first at the father's role before the birth of the child. Do fathers change during the mother's pregnancy? Do they make psychological adjustments in anticipation of the addition to the family? How does pregnancy change the relationship between husband and wife? Do childbirth classes make a difference in the way fathers experience the birth, and are there any lasting effects on the way they relate to the child? Do fathers

who are present during labor and delivery react differently to their newborns? Even if they miss the delivery, fathers are no longer restricted to the traditional peek through the nursery window. How do fathers respond to newborns when they are given the chance to participate in their delivery? Are fathers similar to mothers in their behavior toward very young babies? How are fathers themselves altered by the transition to fatherhood? Are relationships with their wives, parents, and co-workers modified by becoming a father?

As the child grows older, another set of questions becomes relevant. It is natural to wonder whether boys and girls are affected in different ways by a father's active involvement. Do fathers treat their daughters and sons differently? If so, in what ways and at what ages? How important is a father's influence on a child's developing sense of gender identity and social assurance? How can a father influence his child's intellectual development? Most fathers are also husbands. How does their behavior toward their wives affect their children? Some of a father's influence on his children may be indirectly channeled through the mother; the father may affect the mother's feelings and behavior toward the children.

In modern society families exist in a variety of forms. The traditional family arrangement with mother as primary homemaker and caregiver and father as breadwinner is only one of many possible forms of family organization. Our era's high divorce rate creates many single-parent families, and remarriage brings complicated relationships between stepparents and stepchildren. How does divorce affect the father-child relationship? How do single fathers and stepfathers manage the task of child care? Do children develop in different ways when they live primarily with their fathers or their mothers than when they live with both parents? In many

families both parents work, and in a few families mother and father reverse roles so that the mother works outside the home and the father stays home with the children. What are the effects of these arrangements?

Finally, we will explore how society influences fathers and fathering. What forms of support are available for fathers to help them learn their roles and perform them effectively? What are the barriers to fathers' involvement? Individual, relational, societal, and cultural factors all need to be considered. A father's relationship with his own parents and his attitudes toward the importance of being an active father may determine his involvement. How does the timing of entry into fatherhood change men's roles? The quality of a man's marriage and his wife's attitude toward men's roles in child care may be influences. Institutions such as hospitals and the workplace help encourage or discourage father involvement. Finally, societal attitudes concerning both men's and women's roles in work and family have a great impact on fathers and how they play their parenting roles. Fathers are relatively recent objects of study for social scientists, and many of these questions cannot yet be fully answered. Enough is known, however, that we can cast aside many of the myths about fathers.

Theories of Fatherhood

Psychology has a long history of ignoring fathers. One of the main reasons for this neglect of fathers lies in earlier psychological theories of parenthood. Theories are hunches or "best bets" about the way the world probably works. Theories help us to select the problems and issues that are most likely to further our understanding of children's development. But theories also constrain us and lead us away from examining some

problems in favor of some others. Fathers were not just forgotten by accident; they were ignored because it was assumed that they were less important than mothers in influencing the developing child. The dominant theories corresponded to the traditional conception of the remote father. Two theorists played particularly important roles in this historical development: Sigmund Freud, the psychoanalyst, and John Bowlby, the British ethologist.

One of Freud's most important and long-lasting contributions was his theory of early social development. According to Freud, different gratifications associated with various body zones (mouth, genitals, and so on) become important at different stages of development. For example, Freud thought that the oral zone and activities associated with eating, sucking, biting, and swallowing are most important to the infant. Because it was the mother who usually fed and cared for the infant—at least in Vienna at the turn of the century—Freud gave the mother a prominent role in infant development. Freud believed that the infant's relationship with its mother significantly shaped its later personality and social relationships. Fathers were virtually ignored. Freud did not consider them an influence in infancy. Fathers did have a place in Freud's theory of development, but not until a later period in childhood. However, many subsequent followers of Freud accepted his emphasis on the importance of infancy for later development and thereby perpetuated his belief that the mother was the primary socializing agent.

The original details of Freud's theory were not accepted by later theorists, but many of his central ideas survived in different form. In the 1940s and 1950s learning theorists like Robert Sears and John Whiting attempted to translate Freud's ideas into the language of modern theories of learning.² These scientists assumed

that infants gain satisfaction through the reduction of basic biological drives, such as hunger and thirst. The mother became important to the infant because she was the parent who usually fed it (that is, satisfied its hunger drive). Since fathers were typically less involved in feeding, their role in infant development was assumed to be minimal.

John Bowlby's view of early development differed from Freud's, but the end result was the same—mothers were portrayed as the most important figures in infancy. In the 1940s, Bowlby was a prominent critic of institutions and orphanages where infants and children failed to adequately develop, both socially and emotionally. Along with other influential investigators, among them René Spitz and Margaret Ribble, Bowlby saw "maternal deprivation" as the cause of these developmental problems.³ He built on these early speculations in his classic paper, "The Nature of the Child's Tie to His Mother," an eloquent plea for the special importance of the mother in the child's early development. In later papers and books, Bowlby continued to develop his argument concerning the importance of the attachment bond—the process by which the infant comes to prefer specific adults, especially his mother, over others.⁴ Bowlby suggested that attachment is a result of instinctive responses that are important for the protection and survival of the species. Crying, smiling, sucking, clinging, and following all elicit necessary maternal care and protection for the infant and promote contact between mother and infant. Bowlby stressed that the mother is the first and most important object of infant attachment. The mother is biologically prepared to respond to these infant behaviors, just as the infant is predisposed to respond to the sights, sounds, and nurturance provided by his human caretakers. Bowlby believed that it is because of these

biologically programmed systems that mother and infant develop attachment to each other. For us, the important message is Bowlby's emphasis on the mother as a central figure in early development. There is room for only one primary attachment figure, according to Bowlby. As a result, fathers were secondary and at most played a supporting role for the mother.

It is true that throughout Western history fathers have generally taken a minor part in the care and feeding of infants and young children. Anthropological evidence shows, furthermore, that this pattern is by no means unique to the West. In the majority of the world's cultures, mothers are the primary caretakers and the fathers play a lesser role in child rearing.⁵ It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that there is anything biologically necessary about maternal caretaking. In a significant minority of the world's cultures, males and females divide the care of young children more evenly. Among the Trobrianders of Melanesia, for example, the father participates actively in the care, feeding, and transport of young children. Similarly in a number of other cultures, including the Taira of Okinawa, the Aka Pygmies of Africa, and the Ilocos of the Philippines, father and mother share more equally in infant and child care. These exceptions suggest that the roles played by mothers and fathers are not biologically fixed. Instead the definition of gender roles can vary considerably depending on the social, ideological, and physical conditions in different cultures.

According to another argument, fathers, in contrast to mothers, are biologically ill-equipped to be active contributors to child rearing. The biological uniqueness of maternal caretaking is indicated by the fact that our animal ancestors maintain clear sex-role distinctions, with male monkeys, apes, and baboons generally being unin-