


1992

Working with Fathers...Looking for the New Father

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Recommended Citation

Palm, Glen F, "Working with Fathers...Looking for the New Father" (1992). *Faculty Publications*. 26.
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Working with Fathers...

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**changes in
expectations**

androgynous model

**gap between culture
and conduct**

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—G.P.

**family educators can
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Looking For The New Father

The "new father" image has been evolving over the past 20 years (Rotundo, 1985, LaRossa, 1988). The initial change in expectations for fathers included the addition of "demonstrative affection, emotional involvement and spending time with children" (Heath, 1976). This was a new standard for men who had grown up with a "distant father" — breadwinner model. The next stage in the evolving image was the androgynous father (Rotundo, 1985) which incorporated some of the style changes described by Heath and provided a more detailed prescription for involvement as "an active participant in the details of day-to-day child care". The androgynous model blurs the distinctions between motherhood and fatherhood and implies an equal set of expectations for men and women in regards to parenting responsibility. Emphasis on equality both of child care and of household work has been a more recent addition to the "new father role" (e.g., Thompson and Walker, 1989, Hochschild, 1989).

Expectations for the "new father" in the 1990s have been raised to a new level that includes more emotional involvement and more commitment of time not only to children and child care but also to household work. The "new father" image poses a number of challenges for men, including: 1) how to integrate the new expectations; 2) a lack of role models to emulate and 3) confusion about gender identity and the new role.

According to LaRossa (1988) the majority of men have not fully integrated "new father" behavior patterns into their lifestyles. There is still a major gap between the culture (the image and expectations) and the conduct (behavior of the real father) of fatherhood. This gap can lead to guilt and confusion for men. On the other hand, some men feel genuine pride when they compare themselves to their own fathers. Many men are more demonstrative with their affection and much more involved in their children's lives. Part of the confusion for fathers centers around the meanings and importance of masculinity to the father role. Robert Bly (1983) has challenged the image and behavior of the new androgynous male which he describes as the "soft male." Bly argues that men have lost their masculine identity as they have tried to emulate female sensitivity and nurturance.

New father images reflect many contradictions and often are presented as either/or types such as the soft male or the wild man, the distant breadwinner or the warm, nurturant househusband. In some ways the search for an ideal image of father is probably futile and reveals a cultural tendency (and flaw) towards one correct model of behavior for all fathers. The transition to multiple models of good fathers will be difficult; however the reality of diverse family structures and systems makes this an important step to take.

The question for family educators is how can we help men to examine and shape their roles as "involved fathers" in individual ways that fit their family systems? Lack of role clarity can cause anxiety and inconsistent behavior on the part of men who want to be "involved fathers" but feel there are no models or guiding principles for this role. As we work with fathers, there are a number of important points that can be helpful in addressing the issues around role confusion and lack of role models.

new opportunities for men and their children, con't.

new opportunities for men and their children

integrate a variety of old & new role models into a new pattern

father role formed within specific family system

help fathers understand that uncertainty and confusion are inevitable

1. The new father role(s) should be framed as an exciting opportunity for men to create their own roles and attain a new level of intimacy with their children. Men can be freed from some of the old stereotypes and encouraged to carve out new images and behavior patterns. Fathers should be encouraged to identify strengths from their socialization as males and integrate these strengths into the father role. Too often men who want to be involved fathers are approached from a deficit model where the focus is on the skills and knowledge that men lack. Strengths that men bring to parenting (such as playfulness and promotion of independence) must be acknowledged as a legitimate foundation to build upon.

2. The role of parent is multi-dimensional and ever-changing. Much of our research on parenting greatly oversimplifies the skills, attitudes and knowledge it takes to be an effective parent. While most men may feel that they have few relevant role models for "new father" behavior patterns, they may discover that there are a number of male role models from the past that they can integrate into different parent functions. For example, a coach may have modeled teaching skills and clear communication patterns. A minister may have modeled sensitivity and compassion for others. Men may also draw from the female models of parenting that they experienced. Building a new father role involves the creative integration of old models into a new pattern of attitudes and behaviors around child-rearing. The most difficult part of this process may be to suppress behavior patterns based on the old stereotypes about fathers that we learned in our families of origin. Men need support to explore new role patterns, to learn new skills and to identify positive role models from their past. Family educators can play a key role by providing the structure and support to help men create new involved father roles.

3. The father's role(s) will be formed within a specific family system. The sharing of roles within this system and with other members of the community (e.g., day care) is essential in the 1990s. The role of father has to be negotiated in a real life context. Some families will adopt an equal sharing of parenting functions between spouses. More often, a complementary pattern will emerge that is based on skills, desires and, hopefully, mutual respect and understanding between parents. It is essential to respect the diversity of family systems and at the same time to advocate for increased father involvement in each system.

4. The final point that family educators might share with fathers is the inevitability of some uncertainty and confusion. Both are inherent in the role of parent, and are heightened by the new expectations for fathers. Living with uncertainty and confusion is not an easy task and must be balanced with the parent responsibility to provide stable and consistent guidance for their children. This may be especially hard for men who want an easy recipe for success and a money-back guarantee. Family educators can frame the feelings of confusion and uncertainty as part of the growth process that is essential to developing a positive identity as a male parent. This process takes more time and energy for men who want to take on expanded family and parenting responsibilities. Our role as educators is to guide men through a process that includes confusion and uncertainty as part of parent growth.

"The most important goal for the new father is to build a close, healthy relationship with his child. This is an ongoing process that takes time, energy, commitment and support from others."

—Glen Palm

help fathers understand that uncertainty and confusion are inevitable, con't.

References

Dr. Palm is a member of the Minnesota Fathering Alliance and co-editor of a new book: *Working with Fathers: Methods and Perspectives* now available through Oleanna Books. The book was reviewed in this month's Research and Reviews (see page R&R 22.)

The most important goal for the new father is to build a close, healthy relationship with his child. This is an ongoing process that takes time, energy, commitment and support from others. It doesn't happen "naturally" or "automatically." Fathers who are looking for easy answers may be disappointed. Fathers who don't ask the questions will never know what they missed. We can begin to guide men towards more "involved father" roles by recognizing their strengths and helping them to weave a role that fits them and their family situation.

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Key words: fathering, roles (for fathers), androgenous model of parenthood