**Why Children Need Nurturing Fathers**

**Research shows that a strong paternal connection helps young people to manage their emotions and deal with mental-health crises**



Photo: Arin Yoon

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Until a few decades ago, American parents generally fell into specific gender roles, with fathers as providers and mothers as nurturers. Though many more mothers are also providers today, research suggests that fathers still lag behind as responsive caregivers. A soon-to-be published survey of more than 1,600 teenagers by the Harvard Education School’s Making Caring Common project found that almost twice as many 14-to-18-year-old boys and girls feel comfortable opening up to their mothers (72%) as to their fathers (39%) about anxiety, depression or other mental-health challenges. The gap suggests that fathers can become much more involved at home, offering the kind of emotional support that many children today so urgently need.

Intimacy between a parent and a child acts as a protective buffer against the day-to-day challenges of life. Sociologists have found that warm, caring dads produce what they call the “good father effect.” A 2021 study published in the Journal of Family Psychology examined the at-home emotional support received by 388 adolescents over several years, measuring levels of “parental intimacy” by asking questions about how often they went to their mother or father for advice and how much they shared feelings and secrets with them.

Photo: Joe Robles

The researchers found that closeness with fathers was associated with fewer weight concerns, higher self-esteem and fewer depression symptoms for both boys and girls. Close relationships with mothers provided positive benefits but for a narrower range of ages than fathers. “In the context of two-parent families, the protective effects of father-youth intimacy may be more apparent than those of mother-youth intimacy,” the researchers wrote. Since mothers tend to be engaged in such conversations more than fathers, emotional closeness with fathers may be more salient and have more impact, says lead researcher Dr. Anna Hochgraf at the University of Minnesota.

A literature review just published in January in the journal Infant and Child Development looked at nearly four dozen studies on father-child relationships and highlighted the role that dads play in building a child’s skills in regulating emotions. Fathers who were involved in caregiving and play, and who reacted with warmth and greater sensitivity to a child who expressed emotions, were significantly more likely to have children with better emotional balance from infancy to adolescence. Those skills in children are linked, in turn, with higher levels of social competence, peer relationships, academic achievement and resilience, while poor emotional regulation skills are linked with anxiety, depression and behavioral problems.

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Boys can be especially affected by whether fathers are part of the emotional equation. Our culture often tells men that softer emotions are weak, so fathers may have to give sons explicit “permission to feel,” says Marc Brackett, director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. Because many men didn’t grow up with an emotionally warm male role model, they may lack confidence in their own abilities to be sensitive caregivers, which can hold them back. “When women take on the role of being the sole emotional caregivers, the only one who can comfort a child, the one who talks about emotions, it further entrenches the idea that the expression of vulnerable feelings belongs in the domain of women,” says Lisa Damour, author of “The Emotional Lives of Teenagers: Raising Connected, Capable, and Compassionate Adolescents.” She adds, “It’s not enough to encourage our sons to share their inner worlds. The men they look up to and respect need to show them how it’s done.”

Photo: Malin Westermann

A father’s lack of confidence can set off a vicious cycle. Mothers sometimes respond by engaging in what researchers call “gatekeeping” behavior—actions that can obstruct the other partner’s relationship with the child. Maternal gatekeeping can occur in loving, otherwise supportive marriages. In a 2015 study published in the journal Parenting, Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, a professor of psychology at Ohio State University, found that mothers are more likely to “close the gate to fathers” when the women are feeling anxious and depressed or hold excessively high standards for parenting, or when fathers lack confidence.

In these cases, mothers get frustrated when they feel parenting tasks aren’t done to their standards; they may then take care of the tasks themselves or even redo them after the father has completed them. In this way, gatekeeping can become a self-fulfilling prophecy: The more that fathers believe they are incapable of caregiving, the more likely mothers are to take control, limiting paternal involvement and adding to the psychological load that falls on women.

Social factors, like paid leave for mothers or the lack of it for fathers, “conspire to influence gatekeeping behaviors, placing mothers in the role of primary caregiver and placing fathers in the secondary position as helper, and that’s what we as a society need to break,” says Dr. Schoppe-Sullivan. Parents need to be on the lookout for, and guard against, a division of parenting labor that unwittingly reinforces problematic patterns.

Matt Schneider, a father of two and the co-founder of a national support group for fathers called City Dads Group, says that fathers need to push back against the myth that men are less capable of being sensitive than their female counterparts. Fathers don’t need to accept the proposition that they are inherently less nurturing, says Mr. Schneider. Learning how to be a warm, emotionally attentive parent, he says, simply “involves on-the-job training and staying actively engaged until you start getting good at it.”

Photo: Michael Warner

During the early days of the Covid pandemic, when families were mostly home together, more fathers experienced strong intimacy with their children. A couple of months into the lockdowns, Making Caring Common surveyed 1,300 parents and found that 70% of fathers, cutting across race and class, reported feeling closer to their children. More than half reported that their children were sharing more about their emotions. In a follow-up survey published in June 2020 looking at why dads felt closer despite the challenges, one father said it was because “we seem to be communicating more often and on a deeper level.”

With the world moving on from the pandemic, it now takes more deliberate effort to carve out time in the day for such conversations. One place where fathers can take the lead in talking about feelings is at the dinner table. By opening up about the best and worst parts of their own day, they can show that grown men also experience emotions such as joy, sadness and frustration.

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Fathers can also strive to become what Yale’s Dr. Brackett calls an “emotion scientist,” someone who shows curiosity about their children’s feelings and teaches them how to put those feelings into words. Instead of listening in order to solve a problem—a common instinct among men—this type of active listening requires empathy. The focus isn’t on offering advice but on getting a child to open up by asking encouraging questions (“What do you need right now? What can I do to help you?”) and listening to their answers. “To best protect our children’s mental health, particularly our sons,” says Dr. Damour, “we want them to understand that being strong isn’t about being invulnerable.”

Ms. Wallace is a journalist and the author of the forthcoming book, “Never Enough: When Achievement Culture Becomes Toxic—and What We Can Do About it,” to be published by Portfolio in August.

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