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Why Dads Matter

And Moms Don't Toss Babies

In the passenger lounge of the Kansas City airport some years ago, I saw the most amazing thing: an infant flying up above a dividing wall, levitating for just a second, then dropping back down behind the wall. I couldn't look away; it happened again. And again, and again. I surmised one of two things. Either they have flying babies in Kansas City, or this baby was being tossed a couple of feet above head height by someone. And dollars to donuts, it was bound to be a father or grandfather doing the tossing.

I walked around a corner in order to see the event in full and sure enough, it was a "good ol' boy" American father doing the throwing, with

baby loving every bit of it. Not by coincidence, mom was nowhere in sight.

On a recent trip to Asia, I turned on Chinese television, not able to understand a word. But I did understand what I saw in a commercial, and I saw the same thing happening in parks as I walked to my meetings. Fathers and grandpas were throwing their little ones into the air, to the children's immense delight and happiness (assuming that giggles have the same meaning across cultures). Apparently, this startling dad behavior is universal.

Consider this from the perspective of the baby, for whom the challenge of trying to figure out this interesting world is a full-time job.

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Every baby who has ever taken flight in such a way learned an essential life lesson. I call it the “scary world–safe world” experience.

When a baby – boy or girl – is thrown into the air the first few times, what does he or she do? You know, because you’ve seen it yourself, and in fact likely experienced it yourself way back when. The children gasp and hold their breath, eyes wide as quarters. With my children, I’ve often caused and seen that look of sheer terror.

First lesson learned? The child is realizing that the world is a scary place. (This is not a lesson he or she is likely to learn from mom, because moms are not into scaring their children; usually they are the comforters.) But just as quickly as the child feels that fear coming, gravity kicks in and he or she always comes back down, safely into the strong hands of dad.

Second lesson learned? The child learns the world can be a safe place in dad’s hands. He or she experiences two very raw and deeply instructive human emotions. At one point, the child’s whole being screams out, “Holy cannoli, this world is a dang scary place and I can’t seem to trust anyone to take care of me!” Then, a split second later, the child feels, “Oh . . . good, now the world is safe and dad is there for me.”

As babies, most of us have gone from being scared poop-less to giggling hysterically and begging for more. And almost always it was a male – a father, uncle, grandfather, family friend – who provided this experience, satisfying the same inborn desire that fuels the thrill-ride industry. But unlike roller coaster rides, this process is more than merely fun. It teaches the child that while scary things will come in life, you can count on dad to take care of you. This builds both confidence and comfort.

Mom is different. She mostly doesn’t feel compelled to throw babies, but rather to hold them close, offering a different kind of security. Mom’s way of comforting is essential, but it’s also less likely to build confidence – it doesn’t

force the child out of his or her comfort zone. Confidence comes from taking risks and recovering safely from them. Dad’s work.

A sad story told to me by a friend – who is a professional counselor – illustrates this truth poignantly. One of his adult clients was seeing him about his lifelong struggle to trust others. The client told how when he was a boy, his father played with him one day, having him jump off the porch steps and into his arms. With each jump, his dad would take a step back, forcing the boy to jump farther and harder. With each jump, the boy was learning that he could do it – he could take chances and succeed in hitting the mark, his dad’s arms. When the father was a considerable distance from the porch, he encouraged the boy to give it all he had: “Jump one more time!” When he was in mid-air, the father stepped back a few steps, allowing his son to land right on his little face on the concrete walkway. In that instant, the boy’s perception of the world changed dramatically, for life. He was hurt, crying, and terribly shaken, but the inward damage was much greater. He looked up at his father with an expression that screamed, “Why did you do that?” The dad looked sternly at the boy and said, “Just a little lesson, son. *Never* trust anyone.”

And that is exactly what the boy grew up to do. His inability to trust others plagued him well into late adulthood.

Fathers who challenge their children to take risks while keeping them safe give them an irreplaceable gift. They encourage their children to push themselves, to climb higher, to run faster, to throw harder, to not give up on a problem, to move beyond fear. Moms, meanwhile, teach caution: “Please be careful. Not so high!” Children need both lessons.

Even in an age when we claim to have evolved beyond narrow gender stereotypes, fathers know their children need them. A

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national newspaper featured an experimental parenting co-op of four homosexual adults: two lesbians, their sperm-donor friend, and his gay partner. The foursome had one child and were expecting another. The interviewing journalist asked them whether, given their unique parenting arrangement, they ever had conflicts on how to raise the three-year-old child. The sperm-donor father spoke up, saying he believed the biological mother had a tendency to pamper the little boy too much. "When he falls down," he explained, "she wants to rush over and make sure he is okay. I know he will be fine." He wanted his boy to learn to trust in his own ability to solve his own problems – a crucial part of growing up. Like most dads, he was not as inclined as mom to provide an immediate answer, preferring to hold back and let the child figure it out.

In this instance, however, when the journalist probed how the four adults resolved such disagreements, the father sheepishly explained that since he was not a legal parent he just kept quiet. As a result of his silence, this child is missing out on a vital life experience. What's more, this man knows that the boy is being robbed of something important, thanks to a fathering nature that still exists regardless of any attempt to transcend seemingly old-fashioned male and female roles.

Self-Control

The benefits that a mother and a father can provide their children extend to learning self-control. Consider roughhousing. Moms often teach self-control by setting absolute rules on wild behavior in the house, with slightly less rigid rules applying outdoors. This is good. Children need to learn that there are not only an inside voice and an outside voice, but also inside and outside behaviors.

Fathers, however, are more likely to rough it up both in and outside the house. And when

they wrestle with their children, the little ones are likely to get so intoxicated with the excitement that they will take it up a notch to increase the buzz. "It's all fun and games till someone loses an eye" – but with dad, that's only true up to a point. The fun stops quickly when he catches a little swinging foot or fist solidly in the daddy zone. Generally, this is the moment when dad initiates a firm talk about self-control. Usually it only takes a couple of such instances before junior gets the message. Boys with a good dad learn how to be physical while keeping proper self-control and considering others.

Dads and Pro-Social Behavior

Is there any community that is proud of its high gang activity? Is there any community that mourns its low teen-pregnancy rate and wishes that its young ladies would get out there more and mix it up? Moms and dads teach their sons and daughters universal virtues to combat these problems, but in different ways.

Boys generally have a naturally high level of aggression. They like to break things, rule them, show others who's boss. Every boy in every culture must learn how to manage this natural male aggression in socially constructive ways. Boys typically do so by receiving correction, acceptance, and encouragement from older men – whether through sports, in the military, by going hunting, or by building things that benefit others.

When a boy goes over the top – driving too fast, burning things, being aggressive toward others – the men, starting with dad, step in and tell him to bring it down a notch. On the other hand, if the boy is reticent or timid, the men will throw him into the middle of the action. In either scenario, the youngster eventually earns the respect and acceptance of the men around him. When a boy misses out on this because there is no dad to help him navigate through the

curious world of the male, he may turn either hyperviolent or terribly passive.

Too often, the result is gangs. Gang members typically don't have a father to guide them and to let them know that they measure up and can respect themselves. In response, these boys make sure the world recognizes them – by engaging in conscienceless physical violence, intimidation, sexual dominance and opportunism, and foolish risk-taking. Mothers can help curb such behavior by their disapproval and broken hearts, but the most powerful and direct cure is an involved dad.

Girls can be violent as well, and they too will desire the attention of the opposite sex. Young women who have been mothered and fathered well are dramatically less likely to become victims of their own emotions and sexuality. A young girl who is sexually healthy is one who has learned what it's like to be properly loved and cared for by a good man. She learns this first and foremost from her father. To such a girl, a man is not a mystery, and so she is less likely to fall for the manipulative advances of opportunistic males.

Dads and Language Development

Even in terms of language ability, mothers and fathers make different yet essential contributions to a child's development. A mom is more likely to connect verbally with her children at their own level, using words, phrases, and tones of voice that allow for immediate understanding. Dad's way is different, less tailored to the child's own speech and often seemingly less successful. I often noticed this when our children were young. Our child would fall, skin her leg, and start crying. Mom would say, "My goodness, you have a terrible boo-boo." Dad's response might be: "That's quite an abrasion, kid." Dad's way provides a vocabulary lesson. In addition, fathers are also more likely to communicate with non-verbal cues, grunts, and



Photograph by Lucy Clement

facial expressions. Girls and boys who grow up learning from their fathers will be better able to communicate with other males as they enter school and the work world.

Not every man needs to be a stereotypical alpha male in order to be a good dad. Nor do mothers need to be the model of June Cleaver. As I explain in my book *Secure Daughters, Confident Sons: How Parents Guide Their Children into Authentic Masculinity and Femininity*, there are a hundred different ways to be a good man and a good woman. Compare Payton Manning and Yo-Yo Ma: two very different ways of being real men. Or contrast Margaret Thatcher and Jacqueline Kennedy: two very different ways of being undeniably female.

There is indeed a universal male nature, just as there is a female nature. If the Western world's effort to de-gender our children has taught us anything, it's that gender difference is far more than just a social construct.

The reality of distinct male and female natures extends far beyond the bedroom and bathroom. It shows itself on the playground, in the community, at the school, and on the street. Both a man and a woman are required for the creation of a new child, and both are equally indispensable for rearing that child. This holds true no matter what continent we live in, or in what century. To deny it is delusional. By building families and a culture that affirm the importance of both fathers and mothers, we can give our children – all of them – the childhood which they are entitled to, which they deserve, and which they require. ➤