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The Daddying Movement – A Gentle Revolution

By Allan Shedlin

Forty years ago, when I brought my one-year-old daughter to the local playground in our New York City neighborhood, a curious mother asked, “Are you babysitting?” Fast-forward to 2008. Now we commonly see men in birthing and parenting classes, carrying their infants in slings and back packs, pushing them in strollers, playing on playgrounds, attending conferences and school events, and requesting family leave.

For several decades, a social movement has been gently and quietly growing. The confluence of factors that has led us to reexamine gender roles and expand the definition of family has also pushed us to the point where we are in a full-blown social revolution that continues to evolve and hold great promise for children and families, while redefining what it means to be masculine. Slowly, relentlessly, like a snow ball rolling downhill, the movement has picked up strength and size. Nobody trumpeted its coming, and, unlike most revolutions, it began without an articulated injustice, and it is essentially leaderless. It is evolving without a strategic plan, without an identifiable leader, and without bellicose tactics; in other words, the movement’s characteristics challenge some basic male stereotypes.

In 1994 I coined a term that, to me, embraced the active, involved exuberance of my own parenting and that of other men I knew. The word was *daddying*. It implies a lifelong process and commitment to a child’s well-being—physical, emotional, social, intellectual, creative, moral, and spiritual. As options for men in relation to their children and families expands, it seems appropriate to apply this term to this broader revolution: the *Daddying Movement*. Now more than ever, national fatherhood organizations and ad hoc community-based groups, popular media, government reports, and even employers are providing dads with opportunities to think about what is *really* important in men’s lives. In unprecedented numbers, fathers are discovering that by nurturing their children, they are nourishing themselves.

A Personal Journey

My own questions about fatherhood started during my childhood, when I tried to make sense of my own father’s frequent absences—both physical and emotional. I knew he would always be there in a pinch, but I needed more than a pinch. When I became an educator and a father, I continued to observe men and their children. To deepen my understanding of their relationships, I conducted hundreds of hours of interviews with fathers, grandfathers, children and youth. At first, when I told friends that I wanted to use the word *daddying*, they warned me that it sounded wimpy; that men would cringe when they heard it. It took me close to two years to say the word without it sticking in my throat.

The truth, however, has been the opposite. Men I have interviewed for a book I am writing on lifelong *daddying* have not only been *willing* to open up and talk about their feelings, but have been *eager* to do so. For example, I witnessed a former all-state linebacker close to tears as we held our interview driving down the road in his pick-up truck. To him, *daddying*

did not imply loss of masculinity; it helped him acknowledge the tenderness he felt toward his child.

In fact, 84 of the 92 men I interviewed welled-up with tears as they reflected on how they had been fathered, how they had longed for more attention from their dads, and how they yearned to be better parents themselves. The longing fathers and children feel to be meaningfully present in each other's lives is profound, it echoes through generations.

One hundred percent of the fathers I interviewed told me that being a dad has enriched their lives. It has exposed them to a new, deeper kind of love; has diminished their self-focus; and for many, has given them greater appreciation for their parenting partner.

Some signs of the revolution:

- Many men speak comfortably about “*our* pregnancy” and are present at the baby’s delivery.
- New research documents that fathers and children matter to each other.
- Media stories and films about fathers are proliferating.
- Family agency programs are focusing on the importance of fathers in their families.
- Advertising shows men in a tender light and engaged with their children.
- Diaper changing tables are in men’s public restrooms.
- “New baby” congratulation cards are written for fathers.
- More dads are with their kids at playgrounds during the day... on weekdays.
- Men are more willing to accept less pay and fewer promotions to spend more time with their children.
- Fathers are more open to talking about parenting joys and challenges.
- Family-friendly corporate policies include flex-time and paternity leave.

How to see continuing progress:

- When we refer to “nurturing instinct” as opposed to “maternal instinct.”
- When fathers no longer feel that they *look* odd being nurturing.
- When more grandfathers embrace nurturing roles.
- When the term “Mr. Mom” disappears from use.
- When less suspicion is aroused when men are alone with children.
- When the initial 50 percent contribution men make to create a child becomes closer to 50 percent of involvement as the child grows.

The *Daddying Movement* encourages us to reexamine what it means to be human in a world spinning faster and less steadily on its axis. Much as this generation of young adults and children can barely imagine a time when women’s opportunities were more limited, coming generations may take a historic look backward at the place of men in our culture and wonder why it took us so long to bring all hands – and hearts – on deck for the collective good of children, families, and humankind.

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