

COPING WITH FATHERHOOD

Gitanjali Prasad

"A Papa's job is to say, 'lovely' when Mama cooks something. And when there is a party and Mama says 'Oh! There's no soda', a Papa's job is to go to the market and get soda." Anurag (2½ years)

While the role of a mother in the rearing of a child is well defined, that of a father's is very hazy, found GITANJALI PRASAD after talking to some parents and children.

TRYING to define what a father is turned out to be a surprisingly difficult task. Every father I spoke to had to pause and think deeply before he could state what his role was. And children who responded to the questions "Do you know what a mother's role is" without stopping for breath, were stumped when they were asked what they thought a father's role in the family. Mothers were predictably more sure what they thought a father should be.

Even in families where the mother holds a full time job, it is she who is almost wholly responsible for bringing up the children. Why, I wondered. Apart from the biological act of carrying the baby, giving birth and breast-feeding, all of which occupy, at the most, a mere eighteen months of a child's life, there is nothing a mother can do for a child that a father cannot. And yet while the very word motherhood sounds like a sentimental cliché, the concept of fatherhood is hazy.

A father sires the child who bears his name, inherits genetic similarities – and if he's lucky, some property. Till a child comes of age, a father supports him financially, so much is clear. But is that all? How do fathers of today view their role? Has it changed with the times? And what about the increasing number of fathers who work a ten hour day, how do they cope with fatherhood? To find out, I spoke to scores of people. Finally, I identified nine fathers I thought were representative and interviewed separately, the fathers, their wives and children. I got a picture that was immensely illuminating and at once both poignant and amusing.

In spite of having been brought up in a traditional mould where the concept of fatherhood was that of breadwinner and bogeyman, young fathers are now trying to enlarge their own roles. They are involving themselves in the routine mundane tasks that forge the close bonds between mother and child. They are taking on "home work duty" and are consciously trying to bridge the communication gap which leads to the father winning respect while the mother is loved.

All but one of the fathers I interviewed rated themselves as better fathers than their own fathers had been to them. Most remembered their fathers as having been too busy with the outside world and "too distant". They saw very little contribution of their fathers in the evolution of their own personalities. One father felt that the fathers of our parent's generation had no understanding of child psychology. Another felt that the concept of fatherhood had changed with the times.

"In our days children grew up naturally, shaped by their environment. Today there is such fierce competition, children have to be very sharp to succeed. If the father does not involve himself with every stage of his child's development he is bound to be disappointed later in life." The one note of dissent was struck by the oldest father in my survey who felt that his father had been a superior father because the spirit of self-sacrifice was greater in our parents' generation.

But if fathers have taken on additional responsibilities in the child rearing field, they have, one of them, shed the old primeval responsibility of being Atlas. Every single father felt it was his duty to support the child financially to give him the best start in life. And a very large number felt that it was also incumbent upon them to provide an ideal model for the child, "to personify the qualities one would like one's child to inherit."

So much for the father's viewpoint. How do their wives feel they fare? Here I found a sharp difference in assessment which was directly related to the profession of the men and their working hours.

The very first woman I interviewed was married to a highly successful and very busy lawyer. "He works from 9 to 9 on week days and most weekends." Her responses were significant. "What is the father's responsibility in your family?" I asked. "Nothing", she answered flatly. "Would you like more or less

participation?' "Less" she said "Since he can't contribute anything significant anyway, I wish he'd just stay out of it. On week-ends he'll allow them to do things I absolutely forbid and create disciplinary problems for me later. On days when he comes home early he comes just before their bed time and gets them all excited so they can't get to sleep and are late for school the next day."

Ironically, this was not an isolated response. Most of the wives married to men who were in jobs which had long working hours or heavy touring claimed that they had, after much pain and adjustment in the early years, learned to lead independent lives and now found it irksome when their routines were disrupted. In homes where there was little or no domestic help, the father's help was still sought as baby-sitter, but it was the mother who was responsible for everything.

Bitterly, the wives of busy business executives and professionals complained that their husbands were sure to rate themselves as very good fathers because they had very high sounding ideals but in reality, they had no time for the family. They were wrong. With two exceptions, fathers who kept long hours were anguished about the little time they were able to devote to their children but felt trapped by their circumstances. Women married to Government servants gave their husbands high marks for being devoted fathers who had taken on almost the entire responsibility for the child's school work and career-planning. A spot check revealed that all these men were back from work by 5.45 or 6.00 p.m.

And the children? How do they view fatherhood? Every young child responded spontaneously with a very traditional answer. The mother's job was to love and care for the child. The father's job was to go to office and earn money. Even the children of a man who was rated both by himself and his wife as an "exceptional father" had no concept of their father as anything other than a breadwinner. There was only one other father who got an "exceptional" rating from his wife for having taken "paternity leave" when their daughter was born and helping with every aspect of her rearing, but since that little girl is only a couple of months old we'll have to wait a while before we can get her perception of what a father is!

There were some interesting responses. My elder son, Viraj, aged 4 when asked what the mother's most important job was, answered matter-of-factly, "to get the baby out of her tummy." Another boy aged 9, claimed his mother's most important function was to take off his shoes and socks when he came home from school. And of course the only child who saw a father having some household responsibilities was my younger son, Anurag, who felt a father should exert himself to compliment his mother's cooking and organise soda for parties.

Many fathers (my husband included!) who enjoys feeding their children occasionally or telling them stories or playing with them, were surprised and disappointed when the children failed to mention any of this. Frankly, I was surprised too. But perhaps what fathers do, even good fathers, is so little compared to what a mother does routinely, that it does not make an impression on the child.

Older children also feel that the father's main responsibility is to provide for the family. But they also maintained that as fathers had a better knowledge of the outside world, they were better equipped to guide with careers and courses. The distance that today's fathers are trying so hard to bridge still remains between fathers and children. For all the boys and girls who were old enough to understand the query, said that through they respected their fathers, they felt closer to their mother.

In time, the gap will probably be reduced. Happily the concept of fatherhood is changing for the better. To the question "When do you think a father needs his children most?" an encouragingly large number said "All along"."Not just as a meal ticket in old age." "Right through to give purpose and direction to one's life and work."

At the end of my survey, I felt like giving a cautious cheer for the emergence of a new breed of fathers who see an enlarged and enlightened role for themselves. If fathers are way behind mothers in terms of self-sacrifice, that's all right. If things continue in this direction, if child-rearing is shared more evenly, motherhood shouldn't need such large doses of martyrdom either. Long working hours are very obvious deterrent to better 'fathering'. How a new generation of young working men deal with this challenge when

they assume position of responsibility will provide a clue to what tomorrow's father-child relations will be like.

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