



Volume II, No 5

## A CLOSER LOOK AT FATHERING PART I

*This and the following issue of Parenting for Excellence focus on fathers: their images fathering, their insights into how children learn, the activities they do with their children, how they share responsibilities with their wives, and their hopes for their children's future.*

*The families of each of the fathers have already been featured in past issues of the newsletter. The volume and issue number of the articles are listed for easy reference.*

### PAUL BARKER ON FATHERING

*(The Barkers, Sue, Paul, and two-year-old John Paul were featured in "A Question at Balance," Volume 1, No. 3 of PFE. John Paul is now four years old.)*

Paul Barker sat with his arm around his son, periodically asking for his family's comments as he talked about their relationship. Paul began by relating his images of fathering. As an elementary school teacher, he had worked with children enough to get a sense of what was practical to expect of youngsters. He felt he had a good idea of how to balance being a buddy with being a disciplinarian.

He felt that there is one thing new parents frequently forget: When parents hear about all the great things other mothers and

fathers are doing, they sometimes feel intimidated. They forget that what they're hearing is a condensation of things which have happened over a period of time. Those impressive activities are blended with lots of times when parents aren't doing anything to brag about—and that's a natural part of parenting, too.

### CREATING AND DEVELOPING INTEREST

Paul finds that John Paul learns best when teaching is done in response to John Paul's natural curiosity. Sue notes that John Paul is especially curious about anything that his Dad is really interested in. For instance, Paul developed John Paul's interest in dinosaurs by reading all kinds of stories about prehistoric times. He also taught John Paul how to model a snake, brontosaurus, and tyrannosaurus out of plasticene.

### THE PARENTAL PARTNERSHIP

The teamwork of parenting is apparent in Sue's response to this father/son interest. Sue followed Paul and John Paul's interest by helping John Paul make a time-line on prehistoric times. She and John Paul did only a little bit on the time line each day. Sometimes they got involved with other things and didn't work on it for a week.

The process itself was very basic: Sue taped many sheets of paper on a wall, lining them up at John Paul's eye level. Next she marked out the periods, listing the name of each

period in its appropriate place. Then she and John Paul licked and adhered "stick-on pictures" of dinosaurs within the proper periods of the time-line. As they discussed the names of the dinosaurs and their periods, they read about dinosaurs and made word cards, spelling each name correctly.

Another example of this parent teamwork evolved from Paul's interest in the Space Shuttle. Paul brought home materials on the Space Shuttle and talked to John Paul about it on many evenings. The family saw the Space Shuttle launching on video recordings, as well as watched NASA films at school.

Sue built upon this father/son curiosity by helping John Paul to make a scaled-down version of the Solar System. First they rolled out balls of clay in sizes relative to the sizes of the actual planets. Since these were too heavy to hang in the form of a solar system, they then took Styrofoam balls and hung them apart at distances roughly relative to the distance between the planets.

#### **FATHER AND SON TOGETHER**

Since Paul's away at work during the day, Sue does most of the weekday activities with John Paul. Paul spends a lot of time with John Paul on the weekends, allowing Sue to have some other time for personal interests.

For example, once when Sue was busy with a project, Paul and John Paul fixed the shingles on the roof and put a bird screen on the chimney. (John Paul learned how to walk on the roof, when he was three years old.)

There have also been many times when Paul and John Paul have amused themselves with paints while Sue has been out of the house. Paul's interest in painting has inspired John Paul to work with water colors. John Paul's favorite subject is boa constrictors.

Paul and John Paul work together on everything from sprucing up the lawn to building a model of a Viking ship. They fix their own meals when they're playing bachelors and John Paul cuts the raw vegetables with a sharp and sizeable knife. This father and son have become quite a

team—a team which is allowing John Paul to become growingly independent...

And what does Paul hope for his son's future? That John Paul be a nice person, more successful than his predecessors, even a world famous archeologist—but ultimately John Paul's the one who'll decide that, and Paul's glad to help prepare the way.

#### **BILL COSTANTINO ON FATHERING**

*(The Costantinos, Cindy, Bill, two-year-old Peter, and four-year-old Renee were featured In "Teaching. Two Children," Volume 2, No. 8 of PFE. Peter is now three- and Renee is five-years-old.)*

Bill Costantino sat comfortably on the steps of his porch, describing how his images of parenting have changed since becoming a father. He talked about the dramatic change which took place in his life when Renee was born. As with all new parents, he went from having none of the responsibilities of caring for a child to having those responsibilities 24 hours a day—at least psychologically. Accepting that responsibility lead to major changes in his life. He felt that no words could fully communicate that experience. It fostered a kind of maturity previously unknown.

#### **LOTS TO LEARN**

Bill observed that children learn in direct proportion to the enthusiasm of their parents. He emphasized that the parents can best instill that enthusiasm in their offspring by involving the children in the parents' favorite activities.

For instance, Bill is fascinated by chemistry and he and the children have done many experiments. Some of them have been as simple as combining baking soda and vinegar. Others have been more complex thermite reactions which require heat to complete the process.

Bill also enjoys working on his cars. The children assist by handing him tools while asking questions about what he's doing. Peter is so fascinated by cars that he asks for permission just to sit in the car and pretend he's driving.

Since Bill also likes to do some of his own woodworking, the children have helped him

*(continued on page 4)*

Basic

Principles

• PART ONE •

## THE RELATION BETWEEN *FATHERING* AND DEVELOPMENT

*Mother must hold the baby close so that the baby knows it is his world;  
Father must take him to the highest hill so that he can see what his world is like.*

Mayan Indian Proverb

Yes, fathers can do mothering, and the children do survive, or even thrive. What seems to happen, though, is that the children get enough mothering but miss a lot of what's best from fathering—which is different.

Good fathering, we're learning, when done in conjunction with good mothering, gives children special gifts that make a critical difference in the quality of the life they lead.

People seem to be wondering a lot lately about whether fathers can do mothering. The answer is, of course, that they can. There's even some evidence from animal studies that nature may have designed fathers to naturally fill in as mothers in emergencies. Researcher I. DeVore reports a case of one 6- to 12-month-old infant baboon whose mother had died and who was adopted by the second-ranking adult male of the group. There are several other reports of such adoptions of infants by adult male primates. There are certainly many more reports of infanticides by male primates, but there does seem to be some provision in the male primate's make-up for nurturing an infant rather than see it perish. We may infer from this that human males, as well, can adequately fill in as mothers when necessary.

Or we may look at just the human evidence.

### FATHERS WHO MOTHER

Most of us know or have heard of motherless children who have been brought up by their fathers.

In many such situations, however, the father has a female caretaker for the children during the time he works. This caretaker usually fills some of the mothering functions and shares with the father some of the children's affection and attachment. In other words, the arrangement, although significantly different in some respects, is still a version of the usual father-mother-children design.

Also, most often when a father becomes the primary parent, he does so after the children are two or three years old. This usually means that the children have formed their primary attachment to the mother and then transferred that initial bond to their father—or added it to the already existing relationship with him. That is, the children's initial, pattern-forming mothering has been done by the mother and then continued by the father.

I don't know personally of, and haven't found in my reading, any instance of a father who has taken an infant at birth, given it full-time care, and been its single, primary object of emotional attachment during the crucial first three years of life without some regular female help—older sister, grandmother, housekeeper, or such. With all the variety of arrangements for childcare throughout history, however, it seems highly probable that such a situation has existed—that fathers alone have “mothered” children through their first few years when their basic definition of themselves and patterns of behavior are being formed.

Of course there have been cases recently of mothers returning to work right after birth and the rather staying home with the newborn over a period of several years. The small numbers of children growing up in this kind of family certainly survive and often seem to thrive.

What newborns have to have to survive and grow is someone to whom they can become emotionally attached. With no one at all to fill that role for them, they will die. With someone to fill it minimally, they will develop very slowly and, without a great deal of later therapeutic intervention, will experience a certain hollowness in their relationships with others throughout their lives. With someone to provide adequate emotional attachment, infants can develop well within the range called normal, and can become adults capable of establishing caring relationships with others. It seems clear enough that fathers can indeed provide this adequate emotional attachment, can fill the primary parenting role usually called mothering.

They can, that is, if what we want is “normal” children.

### MOTHERS WHO MOTHER, FATHERS WHO FATHER

There are several strong indicators, though, that children have a better chance of finding out what being fully human means if they are mothered by mothers and fathered by fathers.

One of these is that there are biological components in pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding that make the mother–infant bond unique. They seem designed to deepen this attachment and to set it up for continuity. Let’s look at some of these biological factors.

One is the hormone lutein, often called progesterone. It is present in one phase of the menstrual cycle and is the predominant hormone during most of pregnancy. It has several effects. The physical ones include preparing the uterus for the fetus and maintaining pregnancy. Emotionally it helps prepare the mother for adapting to and nurturing a new life, It is related to inner-directed feelings, to receptivity, to fuller readiness for holding and nurturing. These hormonally-induced emotional states get the mother ready to receive the newborn with the openness needed to overcome the separation of physical birth. Many fathers in many cultures—increasing numbers in present American culture—experience very special closeness to their newborns. The hormonal readiness of mothers seems not at all to keep fathers from such experience; it just helps ensure that mothers are ready for it.

Research with male sex hormones indicates that they cause a decrease in nurturing behaviors. When testosterone, for example, is given to various female mammals, they act less nurturing. Other studies using androgen yield similar results.

Another study involved male and female rhesus monkeys in total social isolation. Before their adolescence each was presented with an infant. The females were more nurturant and less aggressive toward the infants than the males were. The difference between male and female could not have been culturally induced. Might it be innate?

These and many other studies on the biological basis for parenting imply only that the female is uniquely readied for mothering. They leave open the possibility that males may be just as well suited to fathering. A lot of research, which we’ll look at in Part Two, indicates that this is precisely the case.

J.C.

## TO MOTHER — OF FATHER — IS TO TEACH

*by Joanna Carnahan*

### CARPENTRY FOR TWO-YEAR-OLDS

When next-door neighbors Nathan and Colin were about two years old, Jerry, Nathan's father, decided to begin teaching them how to build. One of the first skills to teach was using a hammer—a great skill, by the way, for increasing the eye-hand coordination of toddlers.

#### THE EQUIPMENT

He started with soft wood, thick boards of very soft pine or soft redwood. Next came small hammers and just the right kind of nails. The ones he used were one-and-a-half-inch roofing nails, the kind used to nail asphalt shingles onto a roof. The heads were very large, which made them easier for two-year-olds to hit, and the shaft of the nail was very strong, so it wouldn't bend if hit off-center. The only other equipment needed was a marker or pencil.

#### THE CONTEXT

Since Jerry worked away from home during the day, he couldn't just catch his students at odd times when they needed diversion. Too, he knew that the first flush of excitement over trying their new "game" would subside after awhile; having weekly times set for these carpentry sessions would give both him and the boys a sense of regularity and order about their work. With help from their mothers, the boys could build up anticipation about their special time with Jerry on carpentry days; and knowing they were counting on working with him helped Jerry keep up the continuity of the lessons and maintain his own enthusiasm for them.

Since Jerry enjoyed building things, he felt that the strongest appeal of carpentry for the boys would be the idea of being able to actually build something. He created this context for them with a simple device, drawing the outline of a house on the boards and putting big dots every inch or two, "where the nails go." That way the boys got plenty of practice hammering and could show off a "finished house."

#### ENSURING SUCCESS

For the first lesson, Jerry started the nails for the boys. He drove each nail into the wood about one-quarter or one-half inch deep. That way the nail wouldn't wobble so the boys didn't have to hold it in place for those first few blows. And that way, if they needed to hold the hammer with both hands at first, they could.

The main idea was to set up the situation so they felt successful. Jerry understood how important it was for the boys to feel, "I'm good at nailing; I can do this really well!" Children who feel that way will want to do more of whatever it is they get such good feelings from doing. They'll think of themselves as successful learners, and they will be.

#### NEXT STEPS

Nathan and Colin had fun for several sessions just pounding in nails Jerry had started for them. They thereby strengthened their muscles, their concentration, their coordination, and their image of themselves as real workers. By then they were also getting better at driving nails in straight.

Next Jerry started the holes for them and let the boys start their own nails. He showed them how to steady the nail near the top, just under the head, until it got well imbedded in the wood. After that was a comfortable process for them, he made the starting holes shallower, then shallower still, until, over time, they were starting nails entirely on their own.

During the next few years, their skills grew as did the things they made. Jerry found scraps of lumber here and there, and brought them home to start a playhouse in the back yard. — But then that's another story! □



(continued from page 2)

to make hobble horses and step stools. They even worked together to set up a solar collector and hot water heater.

Cooking is another area which Bill talks about with zest. Cindy makes home-made pasta and Bill likes to transform it into an Italian delight. Meals offer a lively, conversation—if ill-timed for the whole family.

When Bill's interacting alone with the children, he's "on duty." When he's involved with work, Cindy's "on." Cindy follows up on the activities which Bill's done with the children by asking Renee and Peter to tell her what they did with Daddy. They enjoy recounting the special things they do with Dad—and that helps them strengthen their memories and communication skills.

Both Cindy and Bill are also careful in how they communicate with the children. They try to eliminate phrases such as "have to," "need to," and "must." When they hear the children use those words, they remind Renee and Peter that they do have a choice and then point out some of the options the children have.

What Bill hoped most for Renee and Peter was that they recognize their capability to create the kind of lives that they choose. He wants them to grow up recognizing that they can get anything they want from life and that they have total responsibility for creating the life styles they desire. That may sound like a pretty tall order, but you might believe it possible if you've ever met Peter and Renee.

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