



Volume II, No 6

A CLOSER LOOK AT FATHERING

PART II

KEN FISHER ON FATHERING

(The Fisher family, Becky, Ken, one-year-old Eric and seven-year-old Peter were featured in "There is a Place..." Vol. 1, No. 1 of PEE. Peter is now nine and Eric is three-years old.)

Ken Fisher, smiled as he talked about his images of fathering. When he thought about it, it wasn't his images of fathering that had changed in recent years, but more his behavior as a father. For years he had a consistent image of the kind of father he'd wanted to be, but it wasn't until the past couple of years that he felt he was really living in harmony with it.

BUILDING THEIR RELATIONSHIP

In the past two years, Ken's really taken the responsibility to be with his sons Peter and Eric. Before then, the boys tended to turn to Becky with their special needs. It was quite natural, Becky was with them more because Ken was away at work during the day.

Becky and Ken decided that Ken could best expand his relationship with the boys by spending time alone with them. Ken and Becky set a specific night when each of them would go out for the evening, leaving the other parent some time alone with the children. This allowed Ken to develop his relationship with Peter and Eric, and through this Ken found fathering to be more rewarding.

Since Ken feels that the boys learn best by example, he involves them in his favorite projects. Peter helps Ken mow the lawn and Eric helps with a make-believe "edger." The boys also visit Ken at his workshop. Both Peter and Eric amuse themselves with the carpentry activities their Dad introduces, repeatedly practicing a skill in an effort to master it.

FATHER AS A RESOURCE PERSON

Ken's expertise as a carpenter has been a valuable resource for the children. For example, Ken did a field-trip presentation for a group of Eric's friends. He explained that building a house required a cooperative effort from many people. As he talked about his contribution to the team, he identified each of his tools, then returned each tool to its proper place in his apron.

He completed the visit by giving the children a walking tour of the house he was helping to build. He named each part of the house as he pointed to it: stud, door jamb, joist, roof truss. The house, in its partially constructed state, offered an example of the basic structures hidden behind the drywall in each of the children's homes. (Nine-year-old Peter had many early experiences such as this and now he draws simple house plans. He pictures in his mind what he wants, then draws it.)

Peter is also indirectly one of Eric's favorite teachers. Eric delights in following Peter around, learning about the proper construction of a model rocket—or how to make a kite dip in the wind without falling to the ground.

Because Peter is six years older than Eric, there are many times when the boys' interests and abilities lead them in different directions. Having different interests somewhat reduces the competition so common between siblings and helps the boys to be more nurturing with each other. When they do want to use an item at the same time, they learn a lot about "yours," "mine," and "ours," as well as how to communicate feelings. Those social lessons are very practical.

INFORMAL LEARNING

Games have been an integral part of the family's learning experiences. Peter gained his strength in math by keeping score in non-competitive dart games. He learned to recognize quantities by playing cards and dominos. He averted boredom at adult meetings by computing the answers to math problems written out by his mother. Now he's creating his own games by writing programs for the school's computer.

A GROWING SENSE OF DIRECTION

Whereas Peter's become interested in writing Basic (a computer language), Eric's more interested in the basics of writing. Becky helps Eric draw "rain-bow letters" by outlining the letters of the alphabet on a chalk board, then giving Eric colored chalk to fill in the spaces in the outlined letters. Eric builds on that by singing "The Alphabet Song," spontaneously bursting into song at any given moment.

Such spontaneity and self-direction is something which Ken and Becky encourage. Ken summarized their beliefs in saying that as children mature, they have an increasing right to choose for themselves. Ken and Becky allow Peter and Eric as many choices as they feel the boys are able to handle, even considering Peter's designs for the house they will one day build. In the process, the Fishers are building into the children the character traits they most admire,

and they're building a family bond which supports the boys in working for what they desire.

BERT JACOBSON ON FATHERING

(The Jacobsons, Carolyn, Bert and seventeen month old Adam, were featured in "The Simple Things"; Vol. I. No. 9 of PFE. Adam is now two years old.)

Using a combination of wit and inquiry, Bert Jacobson examined his perceptions of fathering. He expected to have the strong bond which he's developed with Adam, but he's found fathering to be more complicated than he thought it would be. The toughest part of fathering has been changing his own behavior so that it's closer to the behavior he wants Adam to imitate.

Bert felt Adam deserved the respect due any family member and wanted to guide Adam by allowing him to choose from several options. For instance, when Adam used dinner time to practice throwing, Bert gave him the following choices, "Adam, you may either sit at the table with us and not throw your oatmeal around, or you may get down and play elsewhere." It's hard to give a choice like that without a chuckle, but it does remind Adam that his behavior has social implications.

"UNCLE DAVE"

Dave Carrothers, a close friend of the Jacobson's, visits their home about once a week. He's become another member of the family, an unofficial "Uncle Dave." This has extended the Jacobson's family experiences beyond those of the traditional nuclear family and Dave's relationship to Adam reflects many aspects of fathering.

The special closeness between Dave and Adam has also allowed Bert and Carolyn to feel comfortable about leaving Adam for short periods of time. Bert, Carolyn, and Dave began preparing Adam for these brief separations over a period of months, beginning when Adam was about nine months old.

First Dave visited with Adam while Bert and Carolyn were present. When he and Adam were
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"It is always important to remember that both parents contribute to psychological adjustment. A recent longitudinal study demonstrated that the best adjusted adults were those who, in childhood, had warm relationships with effective mothers and fathers in the context of a happy marital relationship."
 Michael E. Lamb, Ed., *The Role of the Father in Child Development*, 2nd. Edition.

Children may have a better chance for healthy development when brought up by one mature, loving parent rather than by two immature, rejecting parents. However, children have the best chance for optimal development when brought up by two parents, both of whom are mature and loving. This is true because children learn special things from each parent; how fathers affect their children is different from how mothers affect those children.

We know this from two aspects of the research on fathering: studies on what happens when fathers are absent while their children are growing up, and others on what happens when fathers are present.

ABSENT FATHERS

Many studies find that boys reared without fathers are generally less masculine than boys reared in two-parent homes. In some circumstances father-absent boys manifest high aggression and an exaggerated form of masculinity, presumably in order to compensate for insecurity about their masculine identification. In other circumstances there are different effects, such as:

- *higher than average dependence and lower assertiveness;*
- *verbal scores higher than math scores on college entrance exams, which is more often a feminine pattern;*
- *more trouble in forming a healthy romantic relationship with a women;*
- *more difficulty in marriage.*

For women, one effect of growing up without a father—or with a withdrawn, unaffectionate father—seems to be a higher likelihood of having problems relating to males. There are often specific tendencies to be less interested in marriage and mothering, to experience orgasm less frequently, and to have less likelihood of a successful marriage.

Many other studies indicate that children growing up without fathers are more likely to have problems with self-control and moral development and are less likely to do well on tests of mental ability, among other effects.

Of course many variables are related to these findings. If a single mother is comfortable financially, has a positive attitude toward her children's father, has a lot of what is termed "ego strength", aspires to a good education for her children, and is able to provide them with a father-surrogate, the effects of their father's absence can be lessened. Also, the older they are when they lose their father, the less significantly affected children are likely to be.

Knowing just these few facts about children who lack fathering gives us some insight into what fathering does for children. There is another fact that takes us a step further. In the second edition of The Role of the Father in Child Development, Michael Lamb cites research that, "children whose fathers are psychologically absent (e.g., distant and inaccessible) suffer consequences that are similar to, although not as extreme as, those suffered when fathers are physically absent."

In other words, while just being there is one thing a father can do for his children, it is what he does while he's there that makes the most difference in their development. Further, what he does subtly and powerfully affects his children in two ways, indirectly and directly.

INDIRECT FATHERING

One of the strongest indirect effects fathering has is stated clearly by John Bowlby in his Maternal Care and Mental Health:

Fathers provide for their wives to enable them to devote themselves unrestrictedly to the care of the infant and toddler (and) by providing love and companionship, they support her emotionally and help her maintain that harmonious contented mood in the aura of which the infant thrives.

This is no poetic theory; it is thoroughly substantiated:

- One study found that when husbands were supportive during labor, their wives were less stressed.
- Another showed that women who felt supported by their husbands were more sensitive to their babies.
- Another, that the better the relationship between a husband and wife, the more time she spent with their child.
- Still another, when husbands described their wives as good mothers, those mothers did a better job of feeding their babies.
- Again, when fathers are present, mothers are generally more positive with their children, yet are less likely to feel a need to over-control the children, yet more effective disciplinarians when discipline is needed.
- And, one factor in a daughter's development of femininity is how fully her father approves of her mother as a feminine, model.

It goes on, but you have the idea. A book for parents by popular religious writer Charlie Shedd is entitled, The Best Dad is a Good Lover. Apparently that's not just his opinion; it's a fact!

DIRECT FATHERING

There are other facts as well. One is that, although mothers and fathers do many of the same kinds of things with their children, there are some subtle but definite differences in how they relate to them. For the New York Times Magazine of June 17, 1979, in the article, "A New Look at Life with Father", Glenn Collins describes work done at the Child Development Unit of Children's Hospital Medical Center in Boston:

Graphs of fathers' and mothers' behavior show distinctive patterns. In all of ten families studied by the Child Development Unit, the chart of the mother's interaction is more modulated, enveloping, secure, and controlled. The dialogue with the father is more playful, exciting and physical. Father displays more rapid shifts from the peaks of involvement to the valleys of minimum attention.

Babies, then, are learning to relate in different ways to different persons right from the first contacts with their parents. Definitely by four weeks old, and probably long before, infants are responding differently to each parent. Researchers think that babies need both kinds of interaction in order to develop their awareness of social styles and exercise their sensitivities to subtle differences—both of which are elements of intelligence.

Pediatrician T. Berry Brazelton, director of the Child Development Unit, describes the distinctiveness of mothers and fathers in another way:

Mother has more of a tendency to teach the baby about inner control, and about how to keep the homeostatic system going; she then builds her stimulation on top of that system in a very smooth, regulated sort of way. The father adds a different dimension, teaching the baby more about some of the ups and downs—and also teaching the baby another very important thing: how to get back in control.

This ability to regain control after testing the limits is a quality that boys without fathers tend to lack; apparently it's a trait children start learning from their fathers in infancy.

Trained observers, videotaping, computer analysis, statistics, the re-searcher's tools all are being used to make us more aware of what's involved in the universal process of fathering—and mothering—and in children who seem designed to grow up best with both. J.C.

TO MOTHER — OF FATHER — IS TO TEACH

by Joanna Carnahan

IT SOUNDS OLD-FASHIONED

It sounds old fashioned, family reading, sitting all together, father reading while mother sews, children curled up listening. Old-fashioned or not, though, more and more families seem to be doing it in some form or other.

ALMOST INEVITABLE

For the Frothinghams, it was almost inevitable. Both Rob and Dianne love to read, and each of them has read frequently to their son, Jamie. By the time he was three, though, they'd begun reading with all three of them together every now and then—Rob reading aloud for a while, then Dianne taking a turn. Reading together this way they've shared Carl Sandburg's Rootabaga Stories, Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House books, and a special favorite called Indian Tales. Besides learning about the worlds depicted in these books, Jamie is learning how a story can be read in different ways—with his mother's quiet expressiveness, stressing important words, pausing for emphasis; or with his father's drama, gestures, and imitation of various character's voices.

ALMOST ACCIDENTALLY

For the Barkers, it happened almost by accident. John Paul was only two, "too little for big books," they'd assumed, but Paul kept telling their son what a great book Charlotte's Web was; what the characters were like, and how much John Paul would love it. Then one night Sue noticed Paul reading Charlotte's Web to John Paul. It didn't have many pictures; she wondered how much of it he'd sit through. When she checked back in, they'd finished three chapters! From then on they didn't worry about John Paul being "too little." With Sue working nearby or all three of them sitting down together, Paul has read to them the rest of Charlotte, then Heidi, and the Little House books. Since John Paul and Sue read to each other often during the day, it's a nice switch for them that Paul is the main reader at night.

AFTER THE DISHES

For the Wilhelms, it started to fulfill a wish—to share with Marty and Vanessa, then six and five, some books that the children felt were too long to read on their own—books such as, again, the Little House books. Usually they read after dinner, most frequently during the winter months; Tim relaxing with their children while Kathleen does most of the reading. "It is," she says, "a good way to get the dishes done fast." All she has to say is, "As soon as the dishes are washed I'll read!" and everyone pitches in.

IT DOESN'T STOP

It doesn't seem to stop, though, after children reach a certain reading level. When Elizabeth Ann and Colin were eleven and seven, both were enthusiastic readers, and weren't read to by their parents much anymore. Then they began to sense that sitting close together and sharing the excitement and humor were part of reading out loud too, and the whole family, without admitting it, missed that a bit. Soon they decided to choose a "family book" to read together. All cuddled up on somebody's bed or sprawled all over the living room floor, they've gone through The Chronicles of Narnia, Watership Down, and All Creatures Great and Small (deleting lots of expletives!)

SHARING THE PLEASURE

The Foremans are even more regular about it. On many nights Jerry reads to nine-year-old Nathan—The Education of Little Tree recently, while Cindy relaxes and listens. Some nights she reads to them from a different book; one was a collection of short biographies called Great Lives, Great Deeds. Nathan has been reading voraciously on his own for years now, but that private pleasure doesn't take the place of sharing reading with the people who mean the most to him. Sharing the pleasure, in fact, is the special secret of family reading's big appeal for almost everyone who tries it. □

(continued from page 2)

thoroughly used to each other Dave took Adam off into another room to read. If Adam desired his parents, they were just on the other side of the door.

Later Dave took Adam for walks to the park. If Adam wanted Mom or Dad, it was only a short walk home. Once this relationship was solid, Bert and Carolyn made a "date." Carolyn red Adam his dinner as usual, and dressed him for bed before she and Bert left.

Dave held Adam a lot when the Jacobson's were out. He walked with Adam around the neighborhood, identifying many of the things they saw. Since Dave was completely focused on Adam's interest and was holding him, Adam felt more secure.

When Adam asked for his parents, Dave re-explained where they were and that they would

come home that night. If Adam felt sad, Dave reflected Adam's feelings, "You're sad that your Mom and Dad aren't here. I understand that you miss them. If you want to cry, it's okay, I'll hold you." Many times just giving Adam "permission" to cry was all Adam needed. Then he'd go on to something else.

Dave carried Adam until Adam started to get tired. Noting this, Dave would mention, "Gee, it's getting to be bedtime. It's okay if you want to put your head on my shoulder and relax. Then he'd leave Adam in his arms until Adam fell asleep.

When Adam awakens in the morning, Bert and Carolyn are always there. Because of his family's sensitivity to his needs, Adam is gradually learning that separation needn't mean loss of love. With that kind of security, Adam's desire for independence will just naturally unfold. □

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