

The Complementarity of Motherhood and Fatherhood:

A Tour de Force of the Relevant Social Science

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The Feminist Revolution

In the last four decades, a feminist revolution has swept the globe. To be sure, this revolution has brought many beneficial changes to our world. Now, for instance, much of the world allows and encourages women to bring their talents into the public spheres of work and public policy.

But this revolution has also brought less welcome developments to the global scene. What might be described as the androgynous impulse—an impulse that seeks to deny any essential or biologically-based differences between men and women—is one of those developments.

This impulse can be found, among other places, in the public policies and social agendas of international bodies such as the United Nations. The U.N. Committee responsible for monitoring compliance with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is one example of this androgynous impulse at the

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international level. This committee has called on countries like Armenia and Belarus to end public policies and practices—such as Mother’s Day and maternal leave policies—that support distinctive maternal roles for women.¹ Instead, the U.N.’s CEDAW committee and other proponents of this type of feminist agenda would like to see public policies that promote an androgynous parenting ethic where fathers and mothers devote equal amounts of time to parenting, and parent with essentially the same style of parent-child interaction.

The primary problem with this androgynous impulse is that does not recognize the unique talents that men and women bring to the most fundamental unit of society—the family. A growing body of social scientific evidence confirms what common sense and many of the world’s religions tell us: men and women do indeed bring different gifts to the parenting enterprise. Consequently, at all levels of social life—the international, national, and local—public policies, cultural norms, and social roles should be organized to protect rather than prohibit the complementary parenting styles that fathers and mothers bring to family life.

I now offer a *tour de force* of recent social scientific research on parenting to lend intellectual support to this claim. But before embarking on an overview of this literature let me offer two caveats:

(1) Not every mother or every father will possess all of the distinctive sex-specific gifts described below. For instance, some fathers are not endowed with a firm temperament suited for discipline, and some mothers are not endowed with a sensitive temperament suited for nurturing. Nevertheless, *most* fathers and mothers possess sex-specific talents related to

¹ <http://www.heritage.org/Press/Commentary/ed082802.cfm>.




parenting, and societies should organize parenting and work roles to take advantage of the way in which these talents tend to be distributed in sex-specific ways.

(2) Likewise, most of the parenting talents described here are possessed by members of both sexes. Nevertheless, one sex tends to excel in each of these talents. For instance, mothers are generally better at nurturing small children than are fathers; but, of course, fathers are also capable of being nurturing. Thus, societies should build on these comparative sex-specific advantages by letting each sex take the lead in the domains where they excel.

Mothers' Unique Talents

Among the many distinctive talents that mothers bring to the parenting enterprise, three stand out: their capacity to breastfeed, their ability to understand infants and children, and their ability to offer nurture or comfort to their children.



Obviously, only mothers can breastfeed their children. Of course, breastfeeding is time consuming and—in our contemporary world—often inconvenient. But most mothers find breastfeeding physically pleasurable and emotionally rewarding; there are also clear health benefits for mothers who breastfeed, such as a marked reduction in the risk of breast cancer for women who breastfeed.² More importantly, the medical literature on the advantages of breastfeeding could not be clearer. Breast milk offers infants a range of sugars, nutrients, and antibodies unavailable in infant formula.³ Breastfeeding protects infants against at least eleven serious maladies—from ear infections to sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Indeed, this research led the American Academy of Pediatrics in 1997 to

² Eleanor Maccoby. 1998. *The Two Sexes: Growing Up Apart, Coming Together*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Pp. 260-262. Steven Rhoads. 2004. *Taking Sex Differences Seriously*. San Francisco: Encounter Books. Pp. 199, 217, 230-233.

³ Rhoads, p. 217.

recommend that infants be breastfed until at least one year of age.⁴ So, clearly, mothers have a very sex-specific advantage in parenting when it comes to breastfeeding.

When it comes to parenting, mothers also excel in interpreting the physical and linguistic cues of their children. Mothers are more responsive to the distinctive cries of infants; they are better able than fathers, for instance, to distinguish between a cry of hunger and a cry of pain from their baby.⁵ They are also better than fathers at detecting the emotions of their children by looking at their faces, postures, and gestures.⁶ One experiment, for instance, found that women are better than men at identifying infant emotions such as sadness, fear, surprise, or joy.⁷ Another study found that adolescents report that their mothers know them better than their fathers.⁸ In sum, compared to fathers, mothers are better able to read their children's words, deeds, and appearance to determine their emotional and physical state.

This maternal sensitivity to children helps explain why mothers are superior when it comes to nurturing the young—especially infants and toddlers. Because they excel in reading their children, they are better able to provide their children with what they need—from a snack to a hug—when they are in some type of distress. Perhaps more importantly, there is growing biological evidence that mothers are primed by their hormones to engage in nurturing behavior such as hugging, praising, or cuddling.⁹ The hormone peptide oxytocin, which is released in women during pregnancy and breastfeeding, makes mothers more

⁴ <http://aappolicy.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/pediatrics;100/6/1035.pdf>


⁵ Maccoby, p. 268. Ross D. Parke. 1996. *Fatherhood*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. P. 49.

⁶ Rhoads, p. 204.

⁷ Rhoads, p. 221.

⁸ Maccoby, p. 272.


⁹ Maccoby, p. 260.



interested in bonding with children and engaging in nurturing behavior than fathers.¹⁰ In other words, not only are women better at nurturing, but they also are more likely to enjoy expending time and energy nurturing children.

Children know this. Numerous studies indicate that infants and toddlers prefer their mothers to their fathers when they seek solace or relief from hunger, fear, sickness, or some other distress.¹¹ In other words, when children look for comfort and consolation, no one compares to mom.

Thus, it should not surprise to find that, as Stanford psychology professor Eleanor Maccoby has observed: “In all known societies, women, whether they are working outside the home or not, assume most of the day-to-day responsibility for child care.”¹² Taken together, mothers’ comparative advantage in breastfeeding, understanding their children, and nurturing makes it functional for societies to organize the bulk of childrearing around the mother.



Fathers’ Unique Talents

Although the distinctive talents that mothers bring to the childrearing enterprise are invaluable—especially for infants and toddlers, fathers also bring an array of distinctive talents to the parenting enterprise. I am not going to speak about the advantages in physical size and competitive instinct that fathers have when it comes to providing and protecting for

¹⁰Rhoads, pp. 198-199.

¹¹Parke, p.122.

¹²Eleanor Maccoby. 1998. *The Two Sexes: Growing Up Apart, Coming Together*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

their families.¹³ Instead, I am going to focus on three advantages that relate specifically to parenting; specifically, fathers excel when it comes to discipline, play, and challenging their children to embrace life's challenges.

Although mothers discipline their children more often than do fathers simply because they spend more time with the children, fathers do have a comparative advantage in this area. Typically, fathers engender more fear than mothers in their children because their comparative physical strength and size, along with the pitch and inflection of their voice, telegraph toughness to their children.¹⁴ Compared to mothers, fathers also are more assertive in their dealings with their children, and less likely to bend family rules or principles for their children.¹⁵ In a word, fathers tend to be firmer and more compelling disciplinarians than mothers. Consequently, fathers are more likely than mothers to get their boys to respond appropriately to their disciplinary strategy, both because of their uniquely firm approach to discipline and because boys seem more likely to respond to discipline from someone of the same sex.¹⁶ For all these reasons, dad's discipline plays a signal role in fostering an orderly climate in the home.

Fathers also have an advantage when it comes to play. Although mothers, once again, spend more time playing with their children than do fathers, the type of play that fathers engage in with their children is distinctive.¹⁷ Fathers are much more likely to engage their


¹³ W. Bradford Wilcox. 2004. The Importance of Fatherhood for the Healthy Development of Children. CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT USER MANUAL SERIES. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

¹⁴ Wade Horn and Tom Sylvester. 2002. *Father Facts*. Gaithersburg, MD: National Fatherhood Initiative. P. 153. David Popenoe. 1996. *Life Without Father*. New York: Free Press. P. 145.


¹⁵ Popenoe, p. 145. Thomas G. Powers et al. 1994. "Compliance and Self-Assertion: Young Children's Responses to Mothers Versus Fathers." *Developmental Psychology* 30: 980-989. Kyle Pruett. 2000. *Fatherhood*. New York: Broadway Books. Pp. 32-33.

¹⁶ Powers et al., pp. 980-989.

¹⁷ Popenoe, pp. 143-144.



infants, toddlers, and older children in vigorous, physical, and exciting forms of play and games.¹⁸ Fathers are more likely than mothers to be found throwing their toddlers in the air, wrestling with their school-age boys, or kicking a soccerball with their teenage daughter. This vigorous style of play is popular among infants and toddlers, who generally prefer to be picked up by their father rather than their mother (if they are not in distress).¹⁹



As importantly, paternal play promotes social skills, intellectual development, and a sense of self-control. The playful side of fathers teaches their children how to regulate their feelings and behavior as they interact with others. Engaging in rough physical play with dad teaches children how to deal with aggressive impulses and physical contact without losing control of their emotions. For instance, one study found that father-child play taught children to recognize others' emotions and to regulate their own emotions.²⁰ As Emory psychologist John Snarey wrote, "children who roughhouse with their fathers... usually quickly learn that biting, kicking, and other forms of physical violence are not acceptable."²¹ In other words, the lessons children learn playing with their fathers prepare them well for the game of life.

Finally, fathers play a central role in pushing their children to face the challenges and opportunities that confront them outside the home. Compared to mothers, fathers are more likely to encourage their children to take up difficult tasks, to seek out novel experiences, and to endure pain and hardship without yielding. At a young age, fathers are more likely than mothers to encourage toddlers to engage in novel activities, to interact with strangers, and to

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Pruett, p. 28. Michael Lamb. 2002. Infant-Father Attachments and Their Impact on Child Development. In C.S. Tamis LeMonda & N. Cabrera (Eds.), *Handbook of Father Involvement: Multidisciplinary Perspectives* (pp. 93-118). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

²⁰ Parke, p. 138.

²¹ Snarey quoted in Popenoe, p. 144.

be independent.²² As children enter adolescence, fathers are more likely to introduce children to the worlds of work, sport, and civil society.²³ The bottom line is that fathers excel in teaching their children the virtues of fortitude, temperance, and prudence as they prepare for life outside their family. Not surprisingly, there is considerable evidence that paternal involvement is associated with higher rates of educational and occupational attainment, self-confidence, and more prosocial behavior for boys *and* girls.²⁴

Fathers' strengths in discipline, play, and challenging behavior are related to their distinctive position in the family. Because of the smaller role they play in procreation and because they do not have the same hormonal priming to engage in nurturing behavior as mothers do, fathers are—to some degree—more distant from their children and, more generally, from the daily emotional dynamics of family life than are mothers. Although this distance can be a liability if fathers are neglectful of their parenting responsibilities, it can be an asset if fathers take advantage of this distance to engage their children in a distinctly fatherly way. In other words, fathers, because of their distance from their children, feel freer to be firm and challenging with their children than do mothers. In general, this distance also makes fathers more likely to focus on their children's future and to take the difficult steps—e.g., telling a son to stop fooling around in school and shape up—that ensure that their children reach their potential and internalize a sense of self-control.

Rutgers sociologist David Popenoe summarizes the complementary strengths of mothers and fathers well:

²² Pruett, pp. 30-31.

²³ Popenoe, pp. 144-145.

²⁴ J Mosley and E. Thompson. 199x. "Fathering Behavior and Child Outcomes: The Role of Race and Poverty." In W. Marsiglio (ed.), *Fatherhood: Contemporary Theory, Research, and Social Policy* (pp. 148-165). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

The complementarity of male and female parenting styles is striking and of enormous importance to a child's overall development... [F]athers express more concern for the child's long-term development, while mothers focus on the child's immediate well-being (which, of course, in its own way has everything to do with a child's long-term well-being.) ... [T]he disciplinary approach of fathers tends to be "firm" while that of mothers tends to be "responsive." While mothers provide an important flexibility and sympathy in their discipline, fathers provide ultimate predictability and consistency. Both dimensions are critical for an efficient, balanced, and humane childrearing regime.²⁵

Outcomes

Research on parenting styles and family structure indicates that sex-differentiated parenting brings important benefits to children. A review of research on parenting in *Child Development* found that children of parents who engaged in sex-typical behavior where the mother was more responsive/nurturing and the father was more challenging/firm were more "competent" than children whose parents did not engage in sex-typical behavior.²⁶ Another study of adolescents found that the best parenting approach was one in which parents were highly responsive *and* highly demanding of their children.²⁷

The research on family structure is also very suggestive. In general, children who grow up in an intact, married family are about 50 percent less likely to experience serious psychological, academic, or social problems as children or young adults, compared to children who grow up in single or stepfamilies.²⁸ The general tenor of this research can be illustrated by briefly considering what we know about how fatherlessness affects boys and girls.

²⁵ Popenoe, pp. 145-146.

²⁶ Popenoe, p. 146.

²⁷ Popenoe, p. 146.

²⁸ Paul Amato and Alan Booth. 1997. *A Generation at Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur. 1994. *Growing Up With a Single Parent*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

For boys, the link between crime and fatherlessness is very clear. As former U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan observed: “A community that allows a large number of young men (and women) to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, . . . that community asks for, and gets, chaos.”²⁹

Boys learn self-control, as we have heard, from playing with and being disciplined by a loving father. As importantly, boys also learn to control their own aggressive instincts when they see a man they respect and love—their father—handling frustration, conflict, and difficulty without resorting to violence.³⁰ By contrast, boys who do not regularly experience the love, discipline, and modeling of a good father are more likely to engage in what is called “compensatory masculinity” where they reject and denigrate all that is feminine and instead seek to prove their masculinity by engaging in domineering and violent behavior.³¹

Studies of crime indicate that one of the strongest predictors of crime is fatherless families. Princeton University sociologist Sara McLanahan found in one study that boys raised outside of an intact nuclear family were more than twice as likely as other boys to end up in prison, even controlling for a range of social and economic factors.³² Another review of the literature on delinquency and crime found that criminals come from broken homes at a disproportionate rate: 70 percent of juveniles in state reform schools, 72 percent of adolescent murders, and 60 percent of rapists grew up in fatherless homes.³³ Studies of crime

²⁹ Daniel Patrick Moynihan. *The Moynihan Report*.

³⁰ Popenoe, p. 154.

³¹ Popenoe, p. 157.

³² Cynthia Harper and Sara McLanahan. 2004. “Father Absence and Youth Incarceration.” *Journal of Research on Adolescence*. Forthcoming.

³³ Eric Brenner. 1999. *Fathers in Prison: A Review of the Data*. Philadelphia, PA: National Center on Fathers and Families.

and family patterns at the neighborhood-level come to similar conclusions. As Harvard sociologist Robert Sampson observes, “Family structure is one of the strongest, if not the strongest, predictor of variations of urban violence across cities in the United States.”³⁴

Clearly, fathers play a central role in civilizing boys. They also play an important role in civilizing girls, as the research on sexual promiscuity and teenage childbearing makes readily apparent.

Fathers who are affectionate and firm with their daughters, who love and respect their wives, and who simply stick around can play a crucial role in minimizing the likelihood that their daughters will be sexually active prior to marriage. The affection that fathers bestow on their daughters makes those daughters less likely to seek attention from young men and to get involved sexually with members of the opposite sex.³⁵ Fathers also protect their daughters from premarital sexual activity by setting clear disciplinary limits for their daughters, monitoring their whereabouts, and by signaling to young men that sexual activity will not be tolerated.³⁶ Finally, studies suggest that when fathers are in the home, they send a biological signal through their pheromones—special aromatic chemical compounds released from men and women’s bodies—that slows the sexual development of their daughters; this,

³⁴ Robert Sampson. 1995. “Unemployment and Imbalanced Sex Ratios: Race-Specific Consequences for Family Structure and Crime.” In M.B. Tucker and C. Mitchell-Kernan, *The Decline in Marriage Among African Americans* (pp. 229-254). New York: Russell Sage Foundation. P. 249. See also Catherine Cubbin, L.W. Pickle, and L. Fingerhut. 2000. “Social Context and Geographic Patterns of Homicide among U.S. Black and White Males.” *American Journal of Public Health* 90: 579-587; and, Michael R. Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi. 1990. *A General Theory of Crime*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

³⁵ Carol W. Metzger *et al.* “The Social Context for Risky Sexual Behavior Among Adolescents.” 17: 419-437. Popenoe, pp. 158-160.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

in turn, makes daughters less interested in sexual activity and less likely to be seen as sexual objects.³⁷

Consequently, girls who grow up in intact families are much less likely to experience puberty at an early age, to be sexually active before marriage, and to get pregnant before marriage.³⁸ Indeed, the longer fathers stick around, the less likely girls are to be sexually active prior to marriage. One study found that about 35 percent of girls in the United States whose fathers left before age 6 became pregnant as teenagers, that 10 percent of girls in the United States whose fathers left them between the ages of 6 and 18 became pregnant as teenagers, but that only 5 percent of girls whose fathers stayed with them throughout childhood became pregnant as adolescents.³⁹

Conclusion: The Social Scientific Gender Revolution


I could also present studies indicating that mothers play a unique role in fostering the welfare of children. But because fatherlessness is the bigger problem confronting the world today, I think these studies on fathers are sufficient to indicate the importance of promoting a parenting ethic that embraces rather than rejects the distinct gifts that the sexes bring to the parenting enterprise. *Vive la difference.*

Let me now conclude our *tour de force* of the social scientific literature on gender and parenting by spelling out what should be obvious to all of you. The best psychological, sociological, and biological research to-date now suggests that—on average—men and

³⁷ Bruce Ellis, John Bates, Kenneth Dodge, David Fergusson, John Harwood, Gregory Pettit, and Lianne Woodward. "Does Father Absence Place Daughters at Special Risk for Early Sexual Activity and Teenage Pregnancy." *Child Development* 74: 801-821. Bruce Ellis. "Of fathers and Pheromones: Implications of Cohabitation for Daughters' Pubertal Timing." (161-172). A. Booth editor.


³⁸ Wilcox, forthcoming.

³⁹ Ellis *et al.*



women bring different gifts to the parenting enterprise, that children benefit from having parents with distinct parenting styles, and that family breakdown poses a serious threat to children and to the societies within which they live.

Consequently, international organizations such as the United Nations need to come to terms with the accumulating social scientific evidence that indicates that distinctly gendered approaches to parenting are best for children and families. They have to recognize that most societies will and should organize their approach to parenting along gender-complementarian lines both because this is what comes naturally to most men and women and because this is what is generally best for children. This recognition should be matched by public policies and social norms at the international and national levels that support mothers and fathers who seek to parent in gender-typical ways without penalizing mothers and fathers who depart from gender-typical patterns.



Of course, many influential feminist organizations and other NGOs will resist such a strategy. They will point to academic work that claims sex differences are just a consequence of socialization patterns in societies that are organized along sexist lines. But such resistance will look increasingly futile in the face of growing scientific evidence that men and women are generally different, especially when it comes to the parenting enterprise. Even Eleanor Maccoby, the distinguished feminist psychologist at Stanford University who championed the idea that sex differences were caused only by socialization, is now acknowledging the importance of biology in explaining sex differences in parenting. In her latest book, *The Two Sexes*, she concludes her study of men and women by admitting that “it is probably not realistic to set a fifty-fifty division of labor between fathers and mothers in the day-to-day care of children as the most desirable pattern toward which we should strive as a social goal.

We should consider the alternative view: that equity between the sexes does not have to mean exact equality in the sense of the two sexes having exactly the same life-styles and exactly the same allocation of time.”⁴⁰ We must sincerely hope that this alternative view—that gender equity does not require an androgynous parenting ethic—will come to guide the public policies and social norms that shape family life around the globe.

⁴⁰ Maccoby, p. 314.