

Balanced Parenting: A Guide for Involving Fathers

By Bernie Dorsey



Parents as Teachers™

In order to create systems, programs, and services that involve and encourage male participation, it helps to start with awareness of how imbalanced our approach toward male parents has become and move forward from there.

This guide is intended to assist those interested in understanding the current definition of fatherhood, making a plan to modify that definition, and incorporating new attitudes into their interactions with men in their role as fathers. The creation of parental balance can ensure that ALL children may benefit from the specific assets and advantages of both male and female caregivers.

Where we are now ...

Our young boys are growing, right now, into the fathers of tomorrow. Fortunately, we are becoming more aware of the need to help them develop the skills they will require for that role. Unfortunately, oftentimes that help comes in efforts at creating gender equality, as opposed to parental equality. Case in point: Teaching a little boy to wash dishes enables him to be capable in domestic chores. Teaching him through play to gently handle a baby doll and pretend to soothe that crying baby helps him form a definition of fatherhood.

Although men need to be capable domestic partners, we should also expect and prepare them for that same level of capability and partnership in parenting. We still place little (although admittedly, a growing) emphasis on teaching our sons parenting skills, and consequently we have new fathers who are rarely qualified to contribute equally to the care and nurturing of their infant children.

Compound this situation by factoring in the reality that many of today's new fathers have had little or no role model for their fathering, and it becomes clear that we should not be overly surprised when we assess early childhood settings and wonder where all the men are. **We have never expected, nor prepared, them to be there.**

Could it be that encouraging men to become qualified fathers may be perceived as a license to impregnate? On the contrary, it can be argued that a better understanding of what it actually takes to be a father to a child could be one of the most impactful deterrents to unwanted pregnancy.



Understanding the imbalance ...

In lieu of a positive role model, where do young men today learn to be fathers? From their buddies? Not likely, as there still remains a mentality of having to choose between their friends or their children. In some cases they may have become distant with friends who have already become fathers. Or their relationship may elicit encouragement but not necessarily an exchange of knowledge about parenting skills. It may also be perceived that asking for help with one's parenting skills implies an inability to parent, rather than the need for some specific tool.



So do they learn from society? The resounding answer is NO. (Although, thankfully, this too is slowly beginning to change.) For the most part, society's current portrayal of fathers imprints a vision of their role as secondary to mom, always as the assistant or even well-meaning buffoon. Those involved in father development are continually dismayed by images of men who are irresponsible, incompetent, or incapable of enjoying a balanced parental relationship.

Can men learn to parent through parent education classes? Yes. Do they? This typically happens only when mom drags them along. For quite some time now "parent" education has been so tailored to mothers that most curriculums now assume they are the primary audience and therefore, without specific effort to the contrary, will alienate 50 percent of the potential audience.

What Fathers Are Saying "I enjoyed spending time with my daughter with the father-child activities and sharing life experiences for these 12 weeks."

– A. P., *Dads in the Mix, Allegheny Intermediate Unit*

What about parent education specifically for men? This usually revolves around the emotional aspects of fathering as opposed to the practical aspects. More and more we see efforts at assisting men with their fatherhood focusing on their ability to provide financially for their children, and although this is a piece of most men's definition of fatherhood, it most certainly should not be the entire definition.

The single most opportune time to impact and help men define their own individual fatherhood is prior to the birth of their first child. And it is appalling how badly we fail them. Most birthing in hospitals is done through the Women and Infants Department. Forms have lines for "mother" and "other." We continue to design the experience so as not to offend the single mother birthing alone or with a partner other than the biological father, and in doing so we alienate 85 percent of the men who are standing right in front of us searching for relevance. Understandable, but tragic nonetheless.

Building balance into parenting ...

Lesson 1: Open your eyes to the imbalance of parenting information. Objectively assess how many times "parent" actually implies "mom."

Lesson 2: Use cultural sensitivity to gauge your interactions. If we treated a specific ethnic group the way we may be inadvertently treating fathers, we would be violating their civil rights.

Lesson 3: Assume they are already involved. Most men are doing the best they can to fulfill their definition, and their definition and ours may not be the same.



Lesson 4: Recognize that men don't mother. We cannot assess a man's ability to parent based on a mother's expectation. That is not respectful of his definition. The attributes of good parenting reside in both fathers and mothers but they truly work best when they enhance, not duplicate, each other.

Lesson 5: Understand that differences are a good thing. Children NEED the differences fathers and mothers contribute. One of the first steps to creating parental balance is to recognize and embrace the fact that men and women just do some things differently. These differences are not a negative for children.

Lesson 6: Respect the differences. There are lots of great dads out there, and if we study them we will find that they all know one thing: They have the greatest value in the lives of their children because of what they contribute in harmony with mom, not in competition.

Lesson 7: Create a balanced approach. We must work hardest to not only modify the definition of fatherhood but also redefine "parent" as not dad or mom, but both. We have inadvertently skewed the image of parent in an effort to protect the single mother, and in the process we have left out half of the equation.

Lesson 8: Develop expectations. Many men do not participate in a visible way because we never let them know we expect them to.

Lesson 9: Don't settle. It takes a man and a woman to create a child. We can no longer accept that we are only able to communicate with one or the other. In the absence of a court order, all parties are entitled to the information pertaining to that child (let alone the fact that it is only common courtesy to keep both parents informed).

Lesson 10: Be patient. Segregation took time, feminism is taking time ... parental balance will take time. The good news is that men and women are realizing that it is what is best for children.

Bernie Dorsey is the founder of the [Conscious Fathering Program](#), which teaches prenatal and childhood involvement skills to thousands of fathers throughout the nation. Dorsey provides infant care skills for soon-to-be dads while stressing the benefits of responsible fathering. He has personally taught more than 10,000 fathers during the past 12 years, and through the partnership created by the Promoting Responsible Fatherhood program, Conscious Fathering is now available in over 30 locations in 11 states.

Dorsey, who lives in Seattle with his wife of 29 years and 17-year-old son, has been a guest speaker at numerous statewide and national workshops on the topic of fathering and families. In addition, Dorsey's *Guide for Expectant Fathers* is currently being distributed nationwide. He has also produced videos focused on preventing shaken baby syndrome and on postpartum depression awareness. His current work focuses on creating parental balance within systems that serve families.

Last updated: November 2, 2011