

Wide-Awake Fathering

“Coparenting is generally taken to mean the sharing of the physical and emotional care of infants...as well as the problem-solving responsibilities and decision making.”

DR. KYLE PRUETT, *Fatherneed*, 2000

In this chapter you will learn:

- ▶ What it means to be a wide-awake father.
- ▶ How babies are “hardwired” to seek out their fathers.
- ▶ How a dad prepares his child for the real world.
- ▶ Why dads cannot wait to be invited to become involved.

Things are changing. This is a great time for first-time fathers who want to be involved with their children. Attitudes about the importance of fathering have changed over the past few years. Surveys of couples indicate that in a single generation, **coparenting** has become the second highest priority among parents in the late 1990's.

This means there is good news and bad news. The good news is that more parents realize that children need both a mother and father. Recent research has supported these attitudes by recognizing the benefits of a father's involvement on the healthy development of children. Based on this research, governmental policies strongly urge programs like Head Start to include dads as well as moms. Not to be left out, corporations such as General Motors have started featuring fathers and children in their advertisements.

THE BAD NEWS

The bad news is that expectations of father involvement have outpaced the availability of useful information for new dads about their roles. Think about it. How many children do you know who actually have active dads as role models? Not many. The number of biological fathers living with their children has diminished greatly over the past 40 years. As fathers have become disconnected from their children, our society has lost awareness of the traditions of responsible fathering.

Until about the early 1960's approximately 80 percent of the children in America, regardless of their skin color, lived with both their biological mothers and fathers. Today, less than 25 percent of children live with both natural parents. As a consequence of divorce and out-of-wedlock births, about 23 million children live in fatherless homes. Many have only minimal contact with their fathers.

As a result, an entire generation of fatherless children has grown up with only their mother as a parent. In our society, mothers are honored as caregivers, protectors, decision makers, and problem solvers. Over time, awareness about the unique roles of fathers has slipped from our national consciousness. Not surprisingly, fatherless male and female young adults are unsure about how fathers behave or the benefits of their involvement. The ultimate result is that many fathers have little meaningful involvement in the daily lives of their children.

There is staggering evidence that links father absence to adolescent crime, alcohol and drug use, school dropout rates, and emotional disturbance. The legal and prison systems are clogged with fatherless adolescents and young adults. Emotional problems including depression, suicide, anxiety disorders, as well as physical and sexual abuse have also been linked to father absence. Add to these the poverty that accompanies out-of-wedlock teen childbirth, and there are large-scale problems. As pressing as these problems are, the most serious long-term problem created by father absence has been the loss of masculine role models for adulthood.

FATHERING VOCABULARY

coparenting:

A term generally taken to mean the sharing of the "physical and emotional care of infants... as well as in the responsibilities and decision making"

—Pruett, 2000.

...many of today's fathers did not have active fathers to teach them how to be involved dads.

"You need to parent your children in a way that's consistent with how the world runs, or they're going to get run over by the world."

—Dr. Phil McGraw, 2004

Role modeling is the most powerful form of learning that has been discovered. It is the father's most powerful influence on his child. Beginning at birth, it is the father's power as a role model that encourages his children to overcome their dependence on mom and move toward self-reliant maturity.

CASE STUDY 1.1

Raymond was confused. Raymond's life had taken an unexpected path. He was feeling a little out of control. Raymond's wife was pregnant. When Sharon told him, things began to change very quickly. Raymond felt as if he was standing still, while Sharon was rushing ahead.

It was not only the news about the pregnancy that had Raymond off balance. He and Sharon had discussed having a child often during the past year. While they had not exactly tried to get pregnant, they had sort of agreed not to prevent it. The reality of becoming a father had seemed comfortably distant to Raymond.

"I'm excited that we're pregnant...I think. I know Sharon is. I'm having a hard time getting my head around the idea of being a father! Don't get me wrong. I want to be a dad. Only, I haven't given much thought about how to be one. My dad was not around much, and I'm not all that confident about holding up my end of the deal. That has caused some major problems between me and Sharon."

"One day we are daydreaming about *our* baby, and the next all she can talk about is *her* baby. She is so there! She acts like she is the boss or something. Automatically, she knows everything about babies. And what she does not know, her mother does. I thought we were going to raise our baby together. But now, I feel like I am invisible."

Raymond had some serious catching up to do. He was looking for fast answers about being a dad. Like many others, Raymond found that fast and easy answers are easier for mothers to find than fathers. To his credit, Raymond stuck with it. By the time his child was born, he had gained a lot more confidence in himself. He became a more active parent. This was much better than just watching.

FATHERING VOCABULARY

caregiver/caregiving:

One who looks after, nurtures, cherishes, supports, watches over, protects, attends to, and plays with a child.

A SOCIETY WITH FATHERS

We have learned that dads teach by example. Children quickly recognize that dads are different from moms. Both boys and girls benefit from dads' examples of **caregiving**, problem solving, and fun. Dads, for example, are typically more physical in their interactions with their babies. Dads are more likely to pick up their children just to play than moms.

Sadly, many of today's fathers did not have active fathers to teach them how to be involved dads. For those first-time fathers who did not have an involved father as a role model, becoming a hands-on dad can be confusing.

Many new fathers are unaware of the differences in caregiving styles between mothers and fathers. Others may have never considered the teaching role of fathers. Most seem to think that a dad's primary job is just to earn money.

What some fathers do not understand is that children learn positive and negative lessons from their dad's example. Children absorb everything that dads do, even when fathers do not know they are being observed. If Dad is a hard worker, honest, and treats Mom with respect, children benefit from his example.

On the other hand, if Dad curses like a sailor when he is angry, or is absent from the home for weeks at a time, these are things children learn about him. Likewise, if Dad is around, but leaves all the child rearing responsibilities to Mom, these behaviors are also fixed in a child's memory.

Let's consider lessons you learned from your father. Here is an opportunity to see what you recall about your father as a role model.

HOW INVOLVED WAS YOUR DAD?

Look at the pie chart on the following page. The pie has been sliced into eight pieces. Each piece has a statement about your father. Grade your father with Never, Sometimes, or Always. Notice that there are numbers to help you grade your father. At the center of the pie chart is the lowest value: Never. Shade in the part of pie chart that reflects the grade for your father on each question. Below the pie chart is a scoring area for the scores on each question.

Scoring instructions for "How Involved Was Your Dad?" exercise:

Like it or not, our fathers are our role models for fathering. We can benefit from our fathers' strengths as well as weaknesses. Here is how: Look at your father's strengths (rated 5 to 7). These are the areas that you can adopt most easily. Now look at your father's weakest areas (scores below 3). Your father's weakest areas may not be yours. If you are unlike your father in these areas, continue. If you and your father are similar, do not think that there is nothing you can do. For example, if you have trouble with your anger, find an anger control program. In any case, your score can point the way to possible changes you can make to be the best dad you can be. Good luck!

EXERCISE 1.1

HOW INVOLVED WAS YOUR DAD?

H My father was able to maintain stable relationships in his family and at work.

A My father was able to control his anger.

G My father was attentive to my needs as a child.

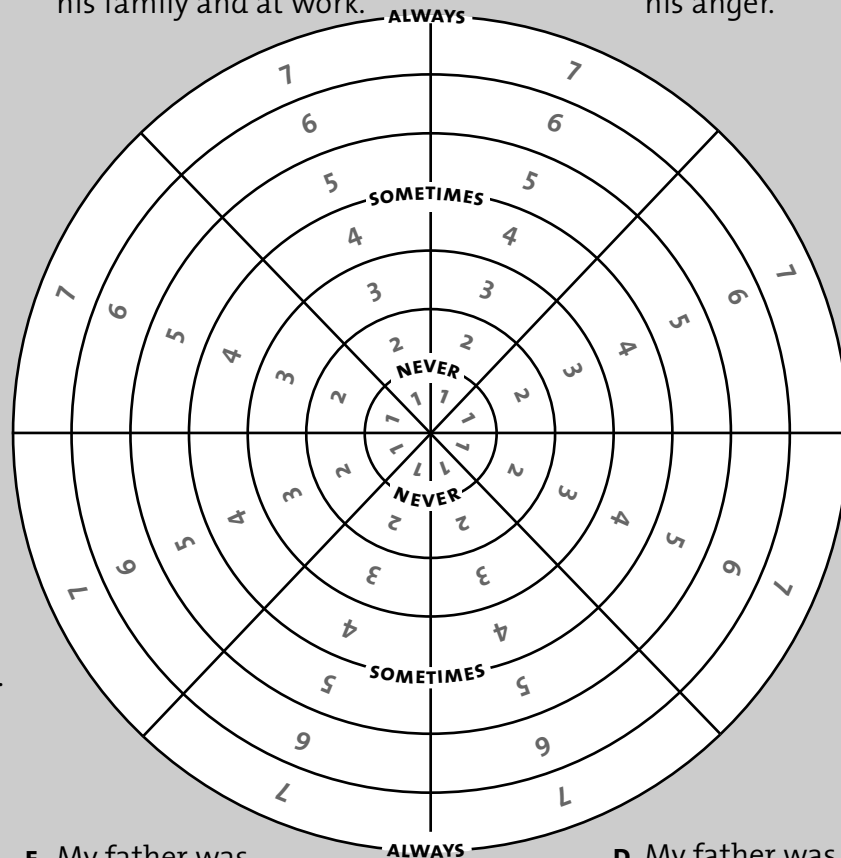
B My father was a competent and active caregiver.

F My father showed his approval of, and affection for me.

C My father was totally involved in my life.

E My father was playful in his interactions with me.

D My father was an effective decision maker and problem solver.



SCORE

A ___ B ___ C ___ D ___ E ___ F ___ G ___ H ___

EXAMPLE

