

BETTER FATHERING WILL HELP END VIOLENCE

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Many countries in the western world seemed to have rediscovered fatherhood. We see fathers in movies and on television, in advertisements and newspaper articles: men are cooing to babies, playing with their kids, spreading advice to the next generation, and getting in touch with their own dads.

It might get a bit corny at times, but the rediscovery of fatherhood is important for men, it's important to our children, and it can be important for women.

It's also part of a long-term solution to ending violence. There is some good evidence that, as more men focus on caregiving and nurturing as the most important things in life (as women have traditionally done), we will see a lot less violence. Less violence against children, less violence against women, and less violence against other men.

Not all men have a child, although the majority of us do sometime in our lives. But the biological part, fathering a child, is pretty simple. The real work, and the real joys, of fatherhood start the moment a baby is born.

Seeing those little hands and fingers for the first time brings with it new demands and responsibilities. Unfortunately, this is where too many of us haven't lived up to our potential. Although an increasing number of men are taking an active part in childcare and domestic responsibilities, studies in some countries show that most fathers still spend less time with their children than did our great grandfathers. In most parts of the world, few employers or governments offer good paternity leave. Even in the Scandinavian countries — the only ones with comprehensive programs — few men take full advantage of such programs, because of work pressures, because they don't see it as worthwhile, or because of insecurities about being manly enough.

Not seeing parenting as real man's work is a problem, but things sometimes get much worse. Some children are physically or sexually abused by their fathers. Some children grow up seeing their father physically and emotionally abuse their mother. Men in many countries ignore child support payments after their marriages have ended. And, meanwhile, huge numbers of sexually active men don't take responsibility for birth control.

What is the root of all these problems?

Many studies have shown that much of the problem of men's violence stems from men's absence from nurturing and caregiving. It's not only that many men don't develop the proper skills of fathering. Rather, a life-long absence from nurturing means that many men don't develop a sense of empathy — an ability to feel what others feel — so necessary for nurturing activities. Without empathy you can inflict violence on someone else without feeling remorse and without feeling you are doing something terribly wrong.

Some men learned violence at the hands of their own father or mother. Many of the men who are abusers of women or children were physically or sexually abused themselves as children or witnessed their father abusing their mother. Others were spanked repeatedly as children and learned that physical force is supposedly consistent with loving someone. (This of course does not mean that most people who are spanked grow up to be abusive, nor that all those who experienced or witnessed abuse become abusive themselves.)

All that is the bad news.

The good news comes to us from studies over the past century that compared two types of tribal

societies: those with violence (against women, against children, against other men) and those with little or no violence. It seems those societies with little or no violence were based on relative equality between the sexes. Men didn't have power over women. Men didn't grow up feeling that to be manly meant dominating and controlling those around them.

The other thing that distinguished the two was that in the societies with little or no violence, men were more involved in childcare. Being a man meant being loving and nurturing. Being a man meant communicating feelings and warmth to those people you were responsible to.

This points to a pathway of change.

If we are concerned about high levels of violence against children, against women, and among men, then one way we can begin to make things better is to find ways to encourage men to take equal responsibility for childcare and to see childrearing just as important as any job we might ever have. This doesn't mean that all men must be fathers, nor that all families must have a man present. It only means that men must take responsibility for changing our lives today.

Let's encourage the fathers we know to make their kids their number one priority and let's celebrate the capacity of men to care and to nurture.

Here are some practical measures that might help that happen:

- In the wealthier countries, encourage government program, like those in Scandinavia, that gives both parents up to one year of paid leave to care for any child under six or with a chronic illness. As well, employees should be allowed up to six years of unpaid parental leave, as well as days off for family illnesses, without losing seniority. We need ongoing education to encourage men to take advantage of such programs.

- Programs in schools starting with young children that focus on parenting and domestic skills.

- Strict enforcement of child support payments for separated parents.

- In those countries who still lack such programs, a comprehensive, non_profit, quality national childcare program.

- Greater vacation time and a shorter work week to allow parents to spend more time with children. (Most European countries have five vacation weeks per year.)

- Equal pay for women workers and the end to job ghettos to ensure that men's work outside the home isn't seen as more important than women's work.

- Legal reforms and government_supported counseling to encourage non_adversarial separation and custody arrangements where possible.

- Laws to prohibit the corporal punishment of children. Such punishment teaches children that violence is an acceptable way to express love and to show you care.

- Encourage educational and awareness programs to end violence, such as the White Ribbon Campaign, which is a growing international effort by men and boys to speak out against violence against women

Changes such as these are ambitious and far reaching. They require us to rethink our individual values as well as our social and economic priorities. They would be part of a revolution in what it means to be a father.

Many countries of the world celebrate a Father's Day sometime during the year. In the past, Father's Day has often seemed hollow, a pretend sort of holiday. But as more and more men rethink our values, as we devote ourselves to be caregivers with all the energy and love we can muster, we really will have something to celebrate this coming Father's Day.