

Fatherhood Matters

The role of new fathers has been changing dramatically for more than half a century. In the 1950's and 1960's expectant fathers paced in hospital waiting rooms while their wives underwent the mysteries of labor and delivery. Some time later a nurse or doctor emerged and showed the new parent his cleaned and swaddled offspring through the nursery window. Fathering preparation rituals might revolve around painting a new room for the baby, indulging his pregnant wife's strange food cravings, and purchasing cigars to hand out when the due date became a reality.

By the 1970's and 1980's it was not uncommon for expectant fathers to attend childbirth preparation classes with their wives. They learned to be birth coaches and planned to be present during labor and delivery as a source of support for the mom-to-be and to experience the miracle of his child being born. Fathering rituals evolved to include being informed about the physiology of pregnancy and child birth, announcing "we're pregnant", witnessing childbirth, changing diapers, and pitching in with middle of the night feedings.

Back in the 1960's and 1970's fewer than six million American children grew up without a father at home. Primary parenting was almost always a mother's role, and fathers were largely viewed as providers, protectors, teachers of sportsmanship, and disciplinarians. Today fatherhood has many expressions. Some fathers assume the role of primary parent.

By now the cliché "babies don't come with instructions" has spawned a parenting education industry, with classes primarily attended by first time mothers. As a society we've always expected mothers to bond with their babies. We didn't give much thought to Dad's role in early childhood. Recent studies on male bonding point to early father involvement, especially during the first few years of a child's life, as a predictor of long-term father and child attachment, and positive child development. Much can be done to embrace the life-changing transition to fatherhood. Here are a few suggestions for fathers and father-to-be in preparation for Father's Day – and once you have a child every day is father's day!

- Become a partner in positive parenting with your partner/spouse or your child's mother even if you are not planning to be together as a couple. Take a parenting class or read up on child development from infancy to age five so that you can provide your child with safe and appropriate care right from the start.
- What have you learned from being someone's son? Will you imitate the ways in which you were parented by your father or will you raise your child in a different way than the way you were raised?
- Get support for your role as a father. Seek out extended family members or other positive male role models or mentors you can call upon when being a parent gets stressful.
- Become a positive role model for your child. Take care of your own physical and mental health because every day your child learns from what you do as well as what you say.

Caren Fairweather, MPS, is executive director of Maternal-Infant Services Network (MISN) of Orange, Sullivan and Ulster Counties, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to healthy births,

children and families. Visit our website at www.misn-ny.org or call 1-800-453-4666 for more information.