

Being There - "Empathic Caring"

In my last article I suggested that a good starting point for any man in childcare is simply to be there for a child. Since writing that article I have looked into this further and now wonder is that enough. After all, would we accept "just being there" as good enough for female carers?

As far as I am aware, there is no biological reason for women to be better carers than men and there is much evidence to show that fathers want to spend more time with their children but blame work pressures for restricting this. The Fatherhood Institute (www.fatherhoodinstitute.org) has published a research review called "The Costs and Benefits of Active Fatherhood" and clearly children do benefit from a positive male role model. However while more women are in paid employment current, research indicates that the division of labour within the home is not changing that fast, with women tending to continue to fulfil most caring duties within the home. Simon Duncan from the University of Bradford argues that many women make childcare choices based on the balance between their understanding of the child's needs and their understanding of their own needs. Men, like women, have choices to make around childcare but gender concepts seem to affect how we care.

As people, we tend to define ourselves around gender concepts. The Encyclopaedia Britannica notes:- gender identity is "an individual's self-conception as being male or female, as distinguished from actual biological sex". This self-conception then extends into the perception of roles people have as men and women and gender identity becomes fixed into gender roles.

Yet, self-concept or personal identity is as we know affected by early

attachments and bonding. The human brain matures rapidly during early infancy soaking up experiences which then trigger neurological growth germinating emotions, like empathy and sympathy. The toddler who has been lovingly looked after by a nurturing carer develops a positive internal working model, or feels good about him/herself. This nurtured and loved child can then progress into the world transferring a positive internal self image externally. Being both sympathetic and empathic to people. Clearly this person is equipped to formulate healthy relationships with a wide range of diverse people including partners and children.

Conversely, work by Professor Peter Fonagy has provided evidence demonstrating that through parental acts of abuse or maltreatment, the child is forced to see himself as worthless or unlovable.

This maltreatment then impairs the child's reflective capacities and sense of self.

Unfortunately the maltreated toddler will undergo a series of experiences that starve the brain of the stimuli which

promote healthy neurological growth and he or she may develop a negative internal working model of self and feel worthless. This will then affect how the maltreated child views the world and those who inhabit it (seeing both as unsympathetic and scary), and consequently not being able to empathise with or be sympathetic to other people. This will clearly affect his or her future relationships with friends, partners and children.

An intriguing theory purported by Professor Simon Baron-Cohen outlined in his 2003 book "The Essential Difference", attempts to link the fields of typical sex differences in psychology with the field of autism. Autism is a communication and socialisation disability, and along with a tendency to be reliant on routines, people with an autistic spectrum condition can find it difficult to be able to empathise with others.

He proposed that on average, females develop faster in empathy and on average males develop faster in systemizing. People with autism, he argued, show an extreme of the typical male profile in having a disability in empathy alongside intact or even superior systemizing. Men therefore typically appear less empathetic and are more used to systemizing and routines than women.

The fostered child who has experienced maltreatment may find relationships difficult due to his or her own self-concept and lack any feeling of being likable or even worthy. While men, falling within Simon Baron-Cohen's typical male profile, seem to have a tendency to have rather fixed expectations for children or even have rigid views about how children should act. It may then be easy for the fostered child to fail the male carer's expectations which in turn confirms the child's negative self-concept.

Peggy Drexler (an American Psychologist) has researched boys raised by women, either in single parent families or lesbian couples.

In her study she found that the mothers taught their sons ethical behaviour using emotional and empathic language as well as accepting the boy's individual identities rather than imposing an expectation of who they wanted them to be. These boys, she found, developed a confident sense of self and tended to demonstrate an ability not only to be empathetic but also to accept differences and diversity in other people as they were "unfettered by the gender straitjacket that oppresses". It seems that empathic caring is a crucial cornerstone for good childcare which encourages emotional, healthy children.

Maybe just "being there" is a starting point for a man but it is by no means the end. A male carer should begin to balance his understanding of the child's needs with his own needs. Then along with being there a male carer can actively promote the child's own self identity through providing emotional space and being positive about the child. Through this empathetic approach aided with feelings, actions and language a man (like many women) can help a child to develop a positive sense of who he or she is. In this way men can be nurturing carers for children and become more involved in active caring with children. Any adult, man or woman, who can do this with a child is a good carer because this will enable the child to feel likeable and in turn grow up to empathise and appreciate other people on into adulthood.

I do not know of any reason why men can't be good carers.

Philip Heslop

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