

The place of the father, in the mid-sixties

AS a father of four children it is a pleasure to write a few words about the place of the father in the family in the mid-sixties.

I say this because being a nurse and living my working life in a profession that is predominantly female, I have been amazed at the number of colleagues in the health and social service who appear to discount the man in the family unit.

Take midwives for instance. Some still shudder at the thought of the father being present at the birth of his child. I feel very sorry for these people as they have yet to know of the love and emotion that has been shared by the husband and wife to bring about the services of the midwife. The emotion and thoughts of the father at this time are something that appear to be almost unknown to the majority of professional unmarried women. Let me inform them that in most cases it is not morbid curiosity or fear of the unknown but a longing to share in the experience that was started together. When my wife and I had our first baby, we shared this experience together and it was perhaps the greatest experience of my life. To see new life born out of love is beyond description. This occasion enriched our future life considerably.

The family, says the dictionary, consists of husband, wife and children. This is the atmosphere that enables a child to live and develop in a happy, natural way. This also causes the man and woman to find pleasure together and live a life that is truly satisfying. No great revelation in this. We have all come from families. When then will professional people apply this in their work of the family. In many cases the father is completely neglected and forgotten.

At my hospital it has been a great pleasure to establish a day nursery for the staff's children. (I) When on duty, I visit daily and

talk to the staff and children. The youngsters show only momentary interest at the appearance of a man. This is because when they return home father is there. I have also visited residential nurseries. What a difference! Immediately, a man is the centre of attraction. One's hand is held tightly, everyone striving to gain attention. It will be said that this is natural for deprived children. Their behaviour pattern is upset. It is obvious, when visiting these children, that they are unjustly deprived also of male company. When I put this problem to a senior person involved in residential work I was told quite seriously that an odd gardener visited and was not this enough for a substitute father?

Fortunately, more and more family groups are being established amongst these children and what a pleasant, natural atmosphere they present. Where this is not practical I would earnestly suggest that professionally qualified men be appointed more and more to the senior posts in these homes with his women counterpart so that the children are not doubly deprived.

Many people today have still to discover the true place of the father within the family unit.

What then is the function of the father at this present time? This is not an easy question to answer. Let us look at two traditional views expressed hundreds of times.

It is true that even before Christian times the man in the family was master over all he possessed. Perhaps before the war this was true in some homes. With progressive education, the rising standard of living, the woman of the house has gained a much more important role in the management of the family. So today although the father may make big decisions he only does this in full consultation with his wife. It is more than ever before a partnership. Why then do people so lightheartedly discard one partner?

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The Financier

This is not always so in these days. More and more professional and other women are working and gaining in some measure financial independence. Even when the husband is the sole supporter there is a much more rational approach as to how the money should be spent. Again the partnership aspect appears. Many a wife knows how much her husband earns and is so able to plan expenditure more sensibly.

One could go on but surely someone is bound to ask what is left for the father to do or be? He appears to have lost his position in the house, not always the sole financier, not always making decisions. What then is the present picture that emerges?

If he spent his childhood in the North of England he can remember years of shortage in childhood. In the 1930's boys left school, married and had a family without doing a day's work in their lives. Men were reduced to less than human beings, unable to provide for themselves or their families. This is not over-dramatising the situation as I have lived for a period of four years in the North-East and worked with these fine, hardworking men.

Others, because of war, can remember father leaving and the change that brought insecurity and the dominance of mother to fill the gap. Crime increased and who can wonder at this. All experienced shortages of one kind or another. Perhaps one such shortage which is rarely mentioned is that of the constructional type of toy. Today this is so much a part of a boy's life but then only a dream. Until the Education Act of 1944 (unless his parents were well off) he received an elementary type of schooling only.

What then is the father of the 1960's. He is a man with a memory, a man with a desire to improve his family, and give them opportunities which were denied to himself. To give his children a real chance to learn and receive a suitable education depending on the child's ability. He is also a man who with his wife, is building a secure home in an atmosphere that is congenial to healthy, normal development of his children. He also realises that even with the modern labour-saving machines and devices, his wife does not always think that housework is the absolute delight of all reasoning.

It will be admitted that the picture of the average husband coming home from the office or factory is that of an enthusiastic

person rushing from the place of business to catch bus, train or car home. The slowing of the mental process begins so that on reaching home he collapses into his chair with paper in hand there to stay till the T.V. show is over.

Through the teachings in Health Education and other sources, the growing boy is taught that in married life, the housewife works considerably more hours per week than her husband and she is engaged in work that does not tax the mental faculties of any moderately intelligent women. Therefore it is becoming more common to see father actively engaged in the house and changing nappies, feeding babies and many other things that in his father's day was just a joke. The father of today is even more a working partner in the business of 'being married.'

It has shocked many Health Visitors that men have a desire now to undertake their duties. Some grudgingly say 'perhaps they would be suitable for visiting the male geriatric patient or in V.D. follow-up.' There are even fewer who would admit that there is a real work for an experienced father who is professionally qualified in the positive work of Health Visiting. I would turn such a one to a short article written about an American man's experience in the Health Department in San Francisco (2). This should set some rather narrow minded out-of-date minds thinking.

To be serious, it is not only unmarried professionally qualified women that can give expert advice to mother but a father with real experience can also be valuable especially if the trouble in the house is due to a wayward husband.

Finally, listen to any child in a playground of any school. It will not be long before words like 'My father's bigger than yours and he will beat your father. . . . ' No they have not copied a film but they know instinctively that the name of Father, Daddy, Dad means security, strength, dependability and reliability.

Please remember : next time, do not forget father.

Further Reading.

- (1) Carr. A. J. (1964) *So You Want To Start A Nursery : Nursing Times*, 24, 778.
- (2) Kilty. J. D. (1962) *There's A Man In The House : Male Nurses' Journal*, 87, 13.