

Fathering

Accept that fathers parent different than mothers, and offer support

When 10-month-old Simone was born, her dad, Keith Marshall, first approached her as a project that needed to be handled correctly.

"She was so tiny at the beginning, and it was a little scary," said Marshall, of Urbana. "My success as a human being was determined by how well I succeeded at this project. That evolved as I bonded with her, and she became my daughter."

Expectations for fathers have steadily moved away from the distant authoritarian figure of previous generations, and now they are expected to be more engaged with their children, according to Brent McBride, a professor of human development and director of the Child Development Laboratory at the University of Illinois.

To some degree, though, fathers are still treated like they need more help than mothers in parenting. When Marshall leaves his family for a week for work, his wife Christine Gozdzia manages baby and household on her own. But when she travels for work, offers to help him pour in.

"When I go out of town, nobody notices," Marshall said. "When she leaves, people are coming out of the woodwork to help, as though a man home alone with a baby must need help. I appreciate the help. But there's the expectation that fathers don't do and can't do everything a mother does."

When men are engaged in active parenting and provide physical and emotional care, educational involvement, consistent and effective discipline and financial support—children reap a multitude of benefits, including enhanced cognitive development, academic success and life competency, McBride said. Plus, it's also fun for the fathers themselves.

Chris Smith, 38, of Paxton, started staying home with his children after his second child was born so his wife Gwen could go back to work. He was a stay-at-home dad for about a year and said he loved being fully engaged with his children.

"I got the kids ready in the morning, the laundry done, estimated Gwen's arrival for dinner, and still had time to play [computer games] and take online classes," he said.

Chris and Gwen provide balance for their children with different parenting styles.

"I think he's a really good and affectionate dad," Gwen said. "But whereas I focus on relationships, Chris is more of a rules person and disciplinarian."

Gwen said the children go to her for comfort when they're ill, and they look to Chris when they want to invent a game or play outside.

McBride said it's important for mothers and society to acknowledge that fathers'

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forms of play and interaction with their children are different than mothers. Fathers tend to present risk-taking situations that encourage their kids to expand their comfort zone and explore the world, and they often include a child in problem-solving activities.

Fathers also communicate with their children differently than mothers.

While mothers often use expressive and emotive words to describe a situation, fathers use more nouns and get straight to the point.

"If a child is reticent to run out on the field to play kickball, a mother might say, 'Tell me why you don't want to? Let's figure this out,'" McBride said. "The father would be more

likely to say, 'You either need to go out there or you don't. Make the choice and move on.' That's not bad just because it's different."

McBride stressed that it's important for children to learn from each parent's different style of parenting.

"If mothers or society communicate that the father's style is wrong, it makes it easy for them to back away and not engage for the long run," he said. "There are different ways to parent and father, and we need to be accepting of men where they're at and support them. We don't want all men to parent like all women. There's strength in diversity of styles kids are exposed to."

Sustained support, especially from a spouse, for a man's style of parenting gives them confidence to provide their children with quality care, McBride said.

He also said that society should "set up a framework where it is acceptable for men to commit to their role as a parent just as we expect them to commit to their work roles or their relationships with their partners." In fact, society should expect fathers to be actively involved with their children, which means caring for their children when they are sick, meeting with teachers about their child, and providing comfort when a child is frightened, he said. ♦