

Men who respond to impending fatherhood by examining their own childhood produce happier children

By Alexandra Frean, social affairs correspondent of The Times, December 2003

The way men respond to the news that they are to become a father for the first time can have a profound effect on the mental well-being of their children, new research has found.

A ground-breaking study of first-time fathers from London has found that men who responded to impending fatherhood by examining their own childhood and their relationship with their own parents, produce happier and better emotionally-adjusted children.

The study, by Howard Steele, director of the Attachment Research Unit at University College London, also found, however, that the effects of fathers' relationships with their children do not begin to show until their offspring hit puberty. Until that time, the children's relationships with their mothers are far more influential.

The findings, presented at a conference in London co-hosted by the British Psychological Society and Fathers Direct, could have far-reaching policy implications. While women who become pregnant almost instinctively go running to their own mothers to ask about the experience of parenthood and childrearing, men are far less likely to go to either parent for similar insights.

Mr Steele said that it seemed likely that children would benefit if some way could be found during pregnancy to encourage men to reflect on their own upbringing and emotional development as a child. He suggested that Sure Start programmes or ante-natal classes might provide a forum for this to happen.

"It's not a question of whether men felt they were loved during their own childhood. It is a question of whether they have reflected on their own upbringing and organised their thoughts carefully on it," he said.

Mr Steele interviewed 100 fathers whose partners were expecting the couple's first child, using a standard interview technique called the Adult Attachment Interview. The purpose of the interview was to discover how they thought of their own relationship with their parents as they grew up. Key questions included, "why do you think your parents behaved the way they did?" and "has childhood influenced the kind of person you are today?"

Some 53 of the men's children were then interviewed and psychologically assessed when they were five and six years old and again when they were 11.

Mr Steele found that the fathers' initial interviews, conducted during the pregnancy, were powerful predictors of the children's emotional and mental state at age 11, but not of their condition at younger ages.

"With around 40 per cent of the fathers, if you asked them, 'why do you think your

parents behaved the way they did?' the answer would be something like, 'I don't know, ask them.' These men had not really reflected on their relationship with their fathers.

"Their children tended to be less well emotionally adjusted. In particular they had more difficult relationships with their siblings and with their peers; they were less happy and more anxious," Mr Steele said. "The children whose fathers had really thought about the way their parents had related to them as children were happier." Although the fathers' attitudes predicted the children's state of mental health, this did not become apparent until the children hit puberty at the age of 11.

"Until that time the mothers influence is far more profound. It's the old idea that the father prepares the child for the outside world, the world beyond the mother - in this case the world of friends and siblings," Mr Steele said.

Sebastian Kraemer, a consultant in child and adolescent psychiatry at the Tavistock Clinic in London, said that Mr Steele's research was consistent with clinical experience, but this had not previously been demonstrated in systematic research. "It's as if the fathers have to work through the mothers to get to the child," he said.

Dr Kraemer described Mr Steele's suggestion that fathers be encouraged to reflect on their own childhood while their child was still in the womb as "bold and brilliant". "I would urge all Sure Start workers to do this," he said.

He added: "Fathers are less used to thinking of themselves as developing beings. They just think, 'I'm a bloke, I'm here'. Mothers are more likely to have picked up a developmental story from their own mothers."

A Fathers Direct spokesman said the research raised important questions of the nature of parenting education. He added: "Most parenting education is of a practical nature. Perhaps we should be shifting towards helping parents, particularly fathers, to reflect on their own childhood."

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