

## **Key Points from: *Why Dads Leave Insights and Resources for When Partners Become Parents*\* by Meryn G. Callander**

- Fatherhood, much more than motherhood, is a cultural invention. Its meaning is shaped by a culture that conditions a man into certain ways of acting and perceiving himself. Fathers are made, not born.
- Biologically, the male is the more fragile gender of our species. Boys receive far less nurturing than girls and less permission to express their feelings and emotions. Thus the pattern is set for the massive repression of males' needs and feelings that is common to most men raised in English-speaking cultures, and is in turn a primary factor in Male Post Partum Abandonment Syndrome (MPAS) and the Dynamic of Disappearing Dads (DDD).
- Most of these poorly bonded and emotionally repressed boys grow into men who unconsciously seek someone to provide them with the nurturing they were denied as infants and children. When they find her and marry her, they may manage pretty well until a child comes along. Then, when the new mother's primary focus becomes diverted to the baby, many men experience this withdrawal of their partner's attention as abandonment or rejection.
- Women have a strong biological advantage supporting them in forging a secure bond with their offspring.
- Today most of us take our disconnected, unbonded condition for granted. We may even be proud of it—calling it rugged individualism, the backbone of the American way of life.
- Contrary to conventional social and psychological beliefs self-reliance and healthy dependence are inexorably linked. Secure attachment in adulthood to one's mate, affects not only the quality of a person's parenting, but of their entire emotional life.
- Neurobiology reveals that safe, loving connections with others literally "rewires" our brains. Forming a new family, we have a rich opportunity to grow and to heal—together.
- Children are born with a drive to connect to their fathers, and very young children yearn deeply for them.
- There is no evidence that given equal experience and support, parents of either gender necessarily excel as caregivers.
- Men today want to be involved with their children in ways their own dads weren't.
- Sharing the physical and emotional care of their infants and young children is now a major expectation among newly marrying couples.
- The fact that the transition to parenthood places strong and unique strains on a couple's relationship is rarely addressed, yet can be critical in their growing together—or apart.
- While research confirms the profound formative impact of the early years of life, conception through age three is the time of greatest stress and isolation for most parents.
- Atop these stresses, most parents are themselves products of insecure experiences, and in the absence of intervention, this insecure attachment is passed from one generation to the next, so compounding their difficulties in forming healthy intimate relationships.
- Most couples are unaware of the challenges they inevitably encounter by becoming parents. Information and preparation prior to the birth can minimize the stresses and reduce the risk of dads' leaving—physically or emotionally.
- Children are born with a drive to find and connect to their father, and father's instincts—when allowed—prompts them to respond appropriately to their child. Higher levels of prolactin—a bonding hormone—appear in new dads as well as moms.
- A father's active involvement promotes a child's emotional, physical and intellectual development, and social competencies. These positive effects are further enhanced by a mother's support of her partner's active contribution to their child's life.
- High levels of father involvement are strongly linked with both mothers' and fathers' satisfaction with their relationship and with family life.
- Fathers come equipped with the desire and ability to connect deeply with their children in ways that are often discounted and unsupported.

\* Excerpted from "Key Points" in *Why Dads Leave: Insights and Resources for When Partners Become Parents*.

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- While a growing number of men want to be more involved in the care of their children, mothers often unwittingly discourage their partner’s involvement.
- A significant causal factor is their suffering a withdrawal from being tended to in their marital relationship. Depressed, they are likely to themselves withdraw and/or be irritable and aggressive. Women are likely to respond by turning their focus even further from their partner and even more to their child.
- Fathers who feel supported by their wives in finding their own way of caring for the child are less prone to depression and soon develop a strong connection with their infant.
- During the first year, most new dads will feel scared, frightened, helpless, exhausted. In addition, they may feel jealous, and afraid of being abandoned by their wife.
- The challenge for most new dads is finding the demands of employment and fathering to be separate and conflicting roles, and attempting to balance the two.
- Most couples enter parenting with virtually no idea of how it will impact them. The birth of a baby will change their lives—forever.
- The quality of a couple’s existing relationship is the single most important factor to assess in considering readiness to parent. This is the primary predictor of a couple’s adjustment to parenthood and satisfaction with their marriage after baby.
- The five Cs are important elements in a successful partnership: Communication, Commitment, Compassion, Caring, and Change.
- It is important to address the emotional and relational, as well as the physical and intellectual, aspects of pregnancy.
- While the woman is visibly in a major life transition, the father’s transition is primarily internal. Typically he is left to navigate it alone, with little acknowledgement of his specific concerns and emotional stresses.
- Counseling and education for pregnant dads can be vital, especially given that the first year after birth is a peak time for parental separation; fathers’ satisfaction is more likely than mothers’ to decline at this time; and men’s dissatisfaction is more predictive than women’s of the relationship ending.
- Emotional, as well as physical changes, impact a couple’s relationship. Memories of their own birth and childhood may be surfacing, calling for attention.
- A couple’s developing empathy and respect for each others’ feelings and needs, and communicating with the intent to love and to learn, rather than to protect and defend, is key. Make spacious time to talk—ideally daily—at least weekly!
- Breastfeeding, optimal for baby and mother, can leave dad feeling excluded. Education prior to birth, can improve fathers’ support.
- Sex may increase, stay the same, or decrease—any and all is normal. Lack of intercourse can be an opportunity to explore new ways.
- Little acknowledgement is given to pregnancy as a time of tremendous change and uncertainty for many men.
- Sharing feelings can be especially tough for men. Talking with other trusted men can help them to deepen their own ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings.
- While most births are hospital births, studies of birth centers show the superiority of fewer interventions, and homebirths with a skilled attendant show an even better record regarding complications and damage to the baby.
- Most new parents are unprepared for the changes and challenges they encounter after their baby’s birth.
- Most imagine a new baby will bring them closer together, in time this often occurs, but initially the child tends to push the two apart.
- Many couples report a declining satisfaction with their marriage as they move from life as a couple to life as a family.
- “Normative abuse” can severely compromise the infant-parent bond.
- Recognizing the connection between the re-stimulation of their unmet infancy needs with present-time experiences that may trigger feelings of abandonment, a couple can work together to resolve these issues. A third party can be engaged for counsel and support—sooner rather than later.
- Couples who can focus attention on what unites them and produces joy, usually make the transition much more easily.
- Our own attachment history and the repair work we do, strongly impacts our ability to connect with others and deal with the inevitable challenges of becoming parents—together.

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- Few counselors address the realities of insecure attachment and the cascade of feelings and emotions the birth of a child engenders, yet this can greatly facilitate this transition time.
- Recognizing a father’s need for intimate connection within the adult partnership, can minimize his experience of the baby as an intruder and increase his support for breastfeeding.
- If our own infancy/childhood needs were not met, it can be painful facing and meeting the needs of our own babies—it is hard to give what has not been given us.
- We pass our own attachment styles on to our children. A key quality of secure-autonomous adults is not that they had secure attachments with their parents, but that they have an open and coherent way of reflecting on their attachment style.
- While guilt says “I *did* something wrong,” shame says, “I *am* something wrong.” Guilt is focused on behaviors, shame on the self. While guilt is fixable (behavior can be changed), shame feels like it is not (an unworthy self is unredeemable). While there is a consistent link between shame, anger, and hostility, guilt tends to motivate individuals to accept responsibility and may actually inhibit anger and hostility.
- Heartfelt emotions such as appreciation and caring, and other intentionally accessed heartfelt emotions, play a significant role in the neuronal rewiring of dysfunctional patterns. Through the heart, we can actually rewire our neural connections and in so doing, reclaim our ability to nurture, trust and thrive.
- How we care for our children often reflects how we ourselves were parented as children. Without an awareness of the themes of our own early years, we find ourselves reacting to our children out of our own unmet needs, and embodying the same dysfunctional behaviors our parents—albeit unwittingly—inflicted on us.
- Early neglect or abuse are often translated into the belief that we are somehow bad, unworthy of love, or that people cannot be trusted. Healing is possible when we acknowledge the hurt feelings and needs of our inner child, so making them available for review, reflection, and healing.
- Reparenting our inner child is a process of recognizing our inner child by listening to our deepest emotional needs, and offering nurturance and protection.
- What is critical is not the unmet needs of our childhood, but our attitude to it. The focus is not on how or why, but on the beliefs we took on, and how they affect us today.
- When can express our anger, disappointment, or grief about any neglect or abuse we experienced as children, we are less likely to pass this on to our own children.
- Healing experiences can be accessed through many venues—counseling, loving relationships, bodywork—the field of expressive arts, which includes journaling and drawing—is itself enormous.
- When feeling loved and listened to, we feel connected. When feeling hurt and unheard, we feel disconnected. Consider whether your comment or action or response will foster connection, or disconnection.
- The 3 Rs of reconnection are Rewind—acknowledge our hurtful behavior; Repair—apologize and let the others know they did not deserve our behavior; Replay—respond with love and listening.
- The prevailing social and economic climate makes it very difficult for parents to give their children what they need. Truly significant changes will occur only as the social, economic and political fabric values and supports the role of parenting.
- Since we are all directly affected by the way children around the world are cared for, it is inverted logic to think our society cannot afford the cost of supporting its children through the early years. We cannot afford *not* to. Preventive and early intervention programs are universally effective.
- Until we, as individuals and hence as a society, value the art and science of parenting as being of utmost importance to the wellbeing of our world, substantial changes will not occur.
- We are all doing the best we can, with the information and resources available to us. Neither guilt nor blame will serve us. We are all products of our time and culture, as were our parents and those who preceded them.