Book Reviews

Canadian Journal of Family and Youth, 9(1), 2017, pp 41-45
ISSN 1718-9748 © University of Alberta
<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index/php/cjfy>

Raeburn, P. (2015). Do Fathers Matter? What Science Is Telling Us About the Parent We've Overlooked. New York: Scientific American/Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Reviewed by: Cassandra Berge, MacEwan University

Paul Raeburn's book, "Do Fathers Matter? What Science Is Telling Us About the Parent We've Overlooked," examines the role and influence that fathers have in their children's lives from before birth through to adulthood. Raeburn sets out to identify and disprove negative stereotypes and myths that society has plagued fathers with for decades. He examines a vast number of professional's research studies to support his view that fathers have a lot more influence in their children's lives, and on their genetics than society has given them credit for. His background as a science reporter helps him argue his case with evidence of "what we know to be true, not what we think we know" (p. 5), and his goal has been to "replace stereotypes and half-truths with what scientists have discovered to be true" (p. 5). His book outlines the myths and stereotypes that have followed fathers for years, and portrays what has been the role of father's throughout history. Studies using other mammals, such as mice and monkeys, relate to behaviours and evolutionary roles that can be cross examined with human fathers through conception, pregnancy, infants, and raising children, and Raeburn also outlines medical implications that father's may pass onto their children in certain situations. For men thinking about fatherhood Raeburn formulates that,

much of what prepares them to be parents ... [is largely because of] three forces ... at work. One is natural selection, which has shaped them to be well suited for fatherhood. The second is their own family's genetic inheritance, which is part of what

makes each father different from all the others. And the third is diet and toxins and other factors in men's environments. (p. 17)

Throughout history, the stereotypical 'father role' within a family was to be the 'breadwinner' and financially provide for their spouse and children. The issue with this way of thinking is that we have not recognized other fundamental roles that fathers provide and "[o]ur failure to acknowledge fathers' importance is now reflected in the shape of the American family. Fathers are disappearing. Fewer American fathers are participating in the lives of their children now than at any time since the United States began keeping records" (p. 13). The symbols and messages that have been presented in popular culture throughout the 1920's to the 1980's have portrayed fathers as being inept and aloof in regards to childcare, and there has not been emphasis on their roles as contributing members of the family. Men have not been given very much credit for their participation as a parental role model, and due to this, they do not realize the important impact that they have on their children, not only psychologically, but genetically as well.

Raeburn outlines various scientific findings which point to the heavy impact that fathers genetics have on the physiological makeup of their offspring. Paternal importance begins even prior to conception, where each parent's genes are programmed to imprint their offspring in their own unique manner. This methodology supports the

kinship theory ... [whereby f]athers and mothers both have strong interests in seeing their offspring survive. But they want different things for their children, because their reproductive strategies differ ... [m]aternal genes have a substantial interest in the mother's well-being and survival. Paternal genes favor greater allocation of maternal time and effort to their particular child. (pp. 56-57)

This competitive nature creates a tug of war between the paternal and maternal physiological makeup within offspring, striking a delicate balance that must be maintained. Without each part of the equation functioning properly, issues with gene imprinting and mutations can have serious medical ramifications for offspring, including a host of disorders.

Men also experience hormonal changes, such as decreased testosterone levels once babies are born. This is to set the stage for men to become parents and help in the process of raising their children, a vital requirement for the human species. Raeburn suggests that the evolution of father's significance in parenting is due to the development of human intelligence. As brain sizes have increased in humans over hundreds of years, infants are born extremely young and vulnerable so that they can fit through the birth canal. Because "[h]uman children take longer than any other animal to reach the point at which they can find enough food on their own to survive" (p. 21), they require substantial care for much longer – much more than any other species. To ensure that a child reaches maturation with the best possible outcome can be overwhelming for only one caregiver (typically mothers) to endure, and therefore, it became necessary to have father's also partake in the raising of children. Not only do father's help to support the mother but "[r]esearchers are now showing that fathers play many roles in their families, including those of "companions, care providers, spouses, protectors, models, moral guides, teachers, and, of course, breadwinners, according to one recent study" (p. 14). The relationship between mothers and fathers is also extremely important, and recently a study done called "Families Through Time" (p. 85) shared how intact co-parenting relationships help add to their children's mental well-being, as "[h]appier couples ... provide more nurturing and children who receive more nurturing enter school feeling loved and supported" (p. 72).

The importance of having male influence involved in raising children provides distinctive interactions that fathers provide, which differ from what mothers bring to the table. Fathers can provide much more than money for their families such as "... social interactions, intellectual strategies, or enriching life in some way." If ... it helps the children survive, it makes sense for the family to have evolved in such a way that the father hangs around" (p. 103). Father's also tend to partake in more play time with children than do mothers, including rough and tumble play, which has been shown in studies to be integral in how a child learns positive social interaction. Raeburn describes

[i]nteractions between fathers and their sons and daughters that are playful, affectionate, and engaging predict later popularity in school and among peers, perhaps by teaching children to read emotional expressions on their fathers' faces, and later on those of their peer group. (p. 144)

Some limitations of Raeburn's book is that he is devoted to describing a large amount of scientific studies, usually using mice or other mammals, whose brain activity can be linked to humans. As the book can be appreciated by a wide audience (not just the scientific community), concentration on the studies can come across as a bit dry in comparison to some of the other anecdotes and personal experiences he provides. His approach in linking the sociological issue of 'Do Fathers Matter?' to scientific findings is, however, relative and helps to better support his argument, but I feel as though the studies would be more relatable if he provided more anecdotes and real life experiences along with the studies. Academically, Raeburn's book would be useful to psychologists and people in social work who study family relationships and dynamics; specifically father's effects on children. People in the field of gender studies may also find this book helpful in determining the different roles males and females play in raising children.

Book Reviews

Raeburn's intention is to fight for the recognition fathers deserve, and show the important role that they provide in parenting. As a father to five children himself, he is able to apply his own experience to his research while providing strong scientific evidence to support his argument. He takes technical knowledge, and simplifies it in a way that is easy to relate to as his findings are not only important for the scientific community, to continue research on the impact of fathers within families, but the book also provides important knowledge for society as a whole, and anyone who is looking to become a parent, or people who already have children.

Ruth Feldman of Bar-Ilan University states that it's

[o]ur responsibility as caregivers, scientists, policy makers, mental health professionals, and concerned citizens is that every young child should be given the opportunity to learn how to love, and every young parent should receive the guidance to make it happen. (p.

176)

In order to provide children with the best tools to set foot in world on their own, fathers provide a substantial benefit in helping them develop a balanced physiological and psychological makeup – after all “[f]atherhood is about helping children become happy and healthy adults who are at ease in the world and prepared to become fathers or mothers themselves” (p. 234).