

## The Science of 'Father Love'

Long gone are the days when a father paced back and forth in a smoky hospital waiting room while his wife gave birth elsewhere, in a room full of strangers. This was the archetype during the mid-twentieth century. Fathers are now more in alliance with the creative process of pregnancy and birth, and therefore, mothers and babies. They have also taken up the mantle of being nurturers over the last several decades and have increased their participation in the family. This trend is producing astonishing results; ones which are also based in science.

Today, nearly 90% of fathers are present at the birth of their children. They are also caretaking their children with increasing frequency. In one third of the households with preschool children at home, if a parent is the caretaker, it is the father. In 1975 fathers spent an average of 15 minutes per day with their children; by 1995 it was 2 hours. Fathers are beginning to discover, and put into action, additional facets of their instinctive nature, paternal love. *Can it be a coincidence that this timing correlates perfectly with fathers entering the birthing room and becoming lovingly involved in their children's arrival?*

Science can shed some light on this phenomenon. Research shows that hormonal activity in a father is altered during his mate's pregnancy, and more so if he is present at the birth. Hormones are chemicals secreted by an endocrine gland or some nerve cells that regulate the function of a specific tissue or organ. It is essentially a chemical messenger that transports a signal from one cell to another. In a way, they tell us what to do; how to 'act'. Prolactin, vasopressin and oxytocin are among the hormones that are found at higher levels in men around the time of birth. Increased production of prolactin is known to promote bonding/attachment and caring. Raised vasopressin levels cause a man to want to protect his family and be at home rather than 'on the prowl in search of a mate'. Vasopressin is also known as the monogamy hormone; commitment. Also if a father is intimate with his child, especially through skin to skin contact, his oxytocin production increases. Elevated oxytocin in a father is recognized as a key component in jump-starting and maintaining his nurturing instincts.

Oxytocin is also produced in men and women during loving contact and because of this has been named 'the hormone of love' by experts in the field including Dr. Michel Odent, Sheila Kitzinger and Dr. Sarah Buckley. It is also a necessary hormone for a mother's body to produce in order to ensure a successful pregnancy, labour and birth. Since couples are already 'in the habit' of producing oxytocin during intimacy they can contribute this dimension of their relationship to the mother's labour. Consequently, *father love*, added as an ingredient in the scientific recipe of mother's labour, can be a useful enhancement for birth.

The result of this increased hormonal activity is that bonding, attachment, protection, love, loyalty, commitment and caring are all enhanced in a new father. Thus science is showing us that a father with close, strong, intimate contact during pregnancy, birth and early infancy will be supported by Mother Nature during his early engagement in the family. Fathers are acquiring tenderness and a sense of belonging from engaging with mother and baby during pregnancy, birth and after. This then establishes a more durable foundation for a life-long loving relationship between father and child. Our society as a whole is also benefiting as a result of this transformation in fathers.

An added bonus of this new father/child relationship is that the 'life expectancy' of the family is enhanced. A father who is attached and committed to his children (remember the science) is more likely to stay with the family. Science is on our side and Nature and Nurture are working in harmony. When men's nurturing instincts and hormones are awakened we are destined for a future that is different from our past. As a culture we have the responsibility to see to it that our fathers and children have the opportunity to fulfil their potential together. Children have led fathers through the doorway of tenderness and we have all entered a new era.

*The transition to fatherhood is one of the most significant and challenging experiences a man will ever face.*

*In order to have a satisfying and successful experience fathers must feel safe, supported and confident.*

*To optimize the possibilities for our families, we need to provide appropriate educational, physical and emotional support for 'father love'.*

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