Vive La Difference: Gender & Parenthood

W. Bradford Wilcox

Director of the National Marriage Project
Associate Professor of Sociology
The University of Virginia
The new elite wisdom, articulated in California last year, is that mothers and fathers are fungible.

San Francisco Judge Vaughn Walker: It is beyond “any doubt that parents' genders are irrelevant to children's developmental outcomes.”

Hollywood Star Jennifer Aniston: “Women are realizing it more and more knowing that they don’t have to settle with a man just to have that child.”
Regardless of the elite wisdom, a large and growing body of social science indicates that

- Mothers and Fathers bring distinctive talents to the parenting enterprise; and,
- Children are most likely to thrive and even survive when they are raised by their own mother and father;
- Children long to know and be known by the man and woman who brought them into this world.
Mothers’ Talents

- Breastfeeding
- Understanding children
- Communicating with children
- Nurturing children
Breastfeeding

- Only moms can breastfeed
- Health benefits for mother
  - Lower risk of breast and ovarian cancer
- Health benefits for children
  - Protects against at least 15 maladies
  - 2005: American Academy of Pediatrics recommends infants be breastfed until 1
- Breastfeeding helps cement the biological foundations for a unique maternal-child bond that lasts into and beyond adolescence.
Mothers excel in interpreting expressions, utterances of children

From infancy
- Distinguish cries of hunger and pain from babies

To adolescence
- Adolescents report that mothers are more in tune with their moods
Communicating with Children

- Mothers have an advantage in communication
  - They use more words, use them more precisely
  - Better at interpreting tone & content of children’s words
  - Less likely to forget content of conversations
- Biological basis?
  - Women have more cells in Left Brain
  - Women have a larger corpus callosum
  - Women have more dopamine in language center of brain
Mothers excel in nurturing their children
- Better at reading/communicating with their children
- More emotionally attached to their children

Biological basis?
- Women have much more estrogen
- Women have more oxytocin
- Both hormones promote nurturing behavior
Women’s advantages in breastfeeding, understanding, communicating, & nurturing help explain why the role of motherhood tends to be more strongly tied to the care of children the world over.
Fathers’ Talents

- Providing
- Discipline
- Play
- Challenging children
- Loving Mom
Providership

- Fathers excel in providing
  - After kids arrive, dads work more hours, wives work less
  - In the U.S., about two-thirds of family income typically comes from Dad
  - Their providership plays an important role in securing food, shelter, health care, & education for their children
Discipline

- Fathers excel in disciplining children
  - Strength, size, voice telegraph toughness
  - More assertive, less willing to bend rules than mothers
  - Especially effective with teenage boys

- Biological basis?
  - Testosterone associated with male size, strength, voice, & dominance
Fathers excel in physical play
- More inclined to engage in rough play
- More likely to surprise or excite children
- Children more likely to be stimulated by father & to learn how to deal with aggression from father

Biological basis?
- Testosterone is associated with energy level, strength, physical activity
Fathers excel in pushing their children to embrace challenges, difficulties, outside world

- Encourage kids to engage in novel activities & be independent
- More likely to introduce children to work, sports, civil society/politics
- Teen boys & girls who have active, engaged dads more confident
Loving Mom

- One of most important influences Dad can have on kids is indirect
  - Loving Mom
- Moms who are happily married are
  - More involved, nurturing, better at monitoring
- Dads who treat mom with respect & affection
  - More likely to teach boys to deal with girls/women in a respectful manner
  - More likely to teach girls to expect to be treated well by boys/men in their life
Fatherless Homes

Teens reared in single-mother homes are two to three times more likely to experience serious negative outcomes.
Young Men in Prison

% Young men in prison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Status</th>
<th>% Young Men in Prison</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intact</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Harper and McLanahan 2004
The United States

Dad Stayed
Dad left
6-18
Dad left before six

% Teenage girl pregnancy

The United States

Dad Stayed

Dad left 6-18

Dad left before six

Source: Ellis et al., 2003
Sperm Donor Children of Single Moms much more likely to have problems (Marquardt et al. 2010)

- Trouble with Law
  - Sperm Donor, Single Mother: 2.46
  - Bio Parents: 1

- Substance Abuse
  - Sperm Donor, Single Mother: 2.77
  - Bio Parents: 1
Vive La Différence

- Best psychological, sociological, & biological evidence suggests that men & women bring different talents to the parenting enterprise.

- We ought to organize parenting to best take advantage of the different gifts that moms and dads bring to the parenting enterprise.
The elite wisdom articulated in California last year is wrong. Children are most likely to thrive when they are raised by their own mother and father.

We need to strengthen marriage to ensure that children have the benefit of being in communion with the man and woman who brought them into this world.