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# Fatherneed

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**Kyle D. Pruett**, *Fatherneed: Why Father Care Is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001, 256 pages).

**Kyle D. and Pruett Pruett**, *Partnership Parenting: How Men and Women Parent Differently -- Why It Helps Your Kids and Can Strengthen Your Marriage* (Boston, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009, 240 pages).

“The fullness of fathering,” asserts Dr Kyle Pruett in *Fatherneed*, “lies in the raising, not the having, of children.” By analyzing the benefits of active, engaged fathering to both fathers and their children, as well as providing father-specific advice regarding an array of child development stages, Pruett's book seems well positioned to discourage what he refers to as the “push toward androgyny as a cultural goal” (p. 166). Children, he says, don't want “their fathers to be more like their mothers or vice-versa” (p. 166). Through various real-life anecdotes, Pruett illustrates how children crave the vital differences that distinguish father from mother and thrive when they are given enough quality father-time.

One particular interest of Pruett's is early childhood. He argues, with the support of various studies, that fathering is essential even from the earliest months of a child's life, and outlines the unique traits that fathers tend to display when they interact with their children from infancy onward. Fathers are more “rough-and-tumble,” tending to activate (rather than soothe) their children. The idea of an “adventure with Dad” comes from the fact that fathers often approach their children in less predictable ways than mothers, and encourage more novelty-seeking on the part of their offspring. Father-play makes use of fewer toys than play with mom, and in many cases the main “toy” used by father and child is the father's own body. Fathers, finally, tend to tolerate a higher level of child-frustration before providing assistance to complete tasks, challenging the child to learn to function through and despite the frustration.

In a book on fathering, one does not expect an in-depth analysis of motherhood, and Pruett does not provide one, noting that, until recently, most parenting studies focused almost exclusively on mothers, ignoring the fathers' role and contribution to the direct raising of children. Many mothers themselves can fall into this trap, acting as jealous gatekeepers, endeavoring to control their husbands' behavior with and access to their children. Such gatekeeping behavior is resented by husbands and detrimental to children. How to solve such a problem and encourage shared parenting by both mothers and fathers according to their strengths? Pruett suggests that “for men and women to share the responsibilities and gratifications of the nurturing domain, we need readily available (which probably means subsidized) quality child care.... This is the *only* way shared parenting will continue, or even start to work, for most families” (p. 147, emphasis added).

Such a suggestion is surprising, especially given that Pruett himself notes that the separation of work

from home is a relatively recent phenomena when viewed against the whole sweep of human history; it is only within the last 150 years of industrial and technological revolution that the location of productive, family-sustaining employment has been transferred to a location other than the home and its immediate surroundings. Prior to this great change, mother and father engaged in differing but complementary tasks for the survival of the family, and children participated as appropriate to their age and ability, learning as they worked side-by-side with their elders. Certainly this was a type of parenting which did not require hired-out childcare, but emphasized the unique strengths and abilities of both mothers and fathers.

While it may now be the cultural norm that both men and women work outside the home, this does not mean that men and women are interchangeable, as Pruett recognizes with his detailed descriptions of the particularities of fathers' contributions which illustrate that fathers do not "mother," and mothers do not "father." If this is true, it is surprising that Pruett includes the following quote from Michael Lamb, a psychologist from the University of Cambridge: "With the exception of lactation, there is no evidence that women are biologically predisposed to be better parents than men are," – a statement which can be too readily understood to imply that it makes no difference which parent (or how many) raises a child. When coupled with Pruett's enthusiasm for the stay-at-home dads who raised their children from infancy while their wives went back to work, a note of confusion seems to arise. Certainly mothers have no greater right to raise their children than fathers do – in this sense Lamb's quote is correct – but in another sense it misses the mark, because if what Pruett writes is true, there can be no such thing as gender-neutral parenting. There is only *mothering* and *fathering*, and only a mother can *mother*; only a father can *father*.

It may very well be the case that in particular seasons of life, a child has more need of *mothering* and in others they are more in need of *fathering*; thus in a certain season a stronger presence of the mother may be "better for" the child. An increase in *mothering* cannot replace a lack of *fathering* – Pruett's advice to single mothers regarding how to fulfill their child's fatherneed despite the absence of a father in the immediate household reflects this fact. His disapproval of single women who seek out IVF in order to conceive their own children is due not to the nature of the IVF procedure, but to the fatherlessness to which these women actively choose to subject their children. He echoes the wise question of Penelope Leach, a well-known British psychologist, who asks, "Why is it socially reprehensible for a man to leave a baby fatherless, but courageous, or admirable, for a woman to have a baby whom she knows will be so?" Pruett's wisdom is lacking, however, when he approves of gay "fathers" who adopt and raise children. He makes no mention of the motherlessness suffered by children raised by two gay men, nor does he proffer the same type of advice to gay men that he gives to single women in order to compensate for the lack of a mother in the home.

The most obvious season in life in which children would benefit from a mother's constant presence is that of infancy and early toddlerhood, because of the many nutritional, neurological, and psychological benefits to the child. The American Academy of Pediatrics emphasizes this when they state that breastfeeding "is a public health issue and not just a lifestyle choice." [1] Pruett's study of families who sent mothers back to work and kept fathers at home from their children's infancy does include families who continued breastfeeding despite the separation of mother and child, illustrating that working and breastfeeding are not mutually exclusive. For the mother who mechanically pumps and stores breastmilk, and for the child who suckles milk from Dad's bottle rather than from Mom's breast, the phenomenon is not quite the same as having a constant and direct breastfeeding relationship.

Pruett highlights the benefits he sees arising for children who have full-time fathers; there is little to no reflection on what might be lost if children lack full-time mothers at crucial junctures in life.

*Partnership Parenting*, written by Dr Kyle Pruett nine years later in collaboration with his wife, Dr Marsha Kline Pruett, is less academic observation and more practical parenting advice. The book is addressed to men and women who see themselves as equally suited – yet distinctly equipped – to care for their children, and both are featured in the anecdotes and advice throughout the book. At the same time, Pruett’s propensity to advocate for more dad-involvement, and for more respect for the male-specific way that many fathers interact with their children, continue to play a starring role in this book. The nine-year lapse, as well as perhaps the wifely collaboration, seem to make this book more specifically insightful and useful than *Fatherhood* for those seeking not only practical parenting strategies but also ways to nurture and sustain a marriage during the often stormy years of childrearing.

The advice to couples is particularly valuable in its recognition of the sea-change which can occur in a marriage the moment a first child is born. “When partners become parents, their gender differences come into play in a strong and familiar way, harking back to grade school and the first realization of differences in how the other gender thinks and behaves” (p. 5). Perhaps for many couples who were socialized and educated, and who dated and married, in a culture that tends to reduce the specificity of manhood and womanhood from an early age, gender differences are far from conscious reflection until pregnancy and birth hit a marriage with full force. Suddenly a woman is wholly woman and her struggles and trials with pregnancy and birth are uniquely those of motherhood, and the man’s are uniquely those of fatherhood. Pruett’s book is a boon to first-time parents, in particular to help them figure out how to maintain the vitality of their relationship while they navigate those challenging weeks, months, and years with their first children.

Maternal gatekeeping, or the tendency for a mother to try to control her husband’s interaction with their children – both in intact marriages and in divorces – shows up as an issue in this book as well. Many of the anecdotes shared in the book involve family scenarios with only one or two children in the mix. However, the gatekeeping issue often resolves itself when a couple raises more than one or two children. It is physically impossible (not to mention practically and emotionally unwise) for a mother to try to care for every child simultaneously at all times. Father-care becomes less optional and more a regular way of life in the presence of many children.

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[1] “Breastfeeding and human milk are the normative standards for infant feeding and nutrition. Given the documented short- and long-term medical and neurodevelopmental advantages of breastfeeding, infant nutrition should be considered a public health issue and not only a lifestyle choice. The American Academy of Pediatrics reaffirms its recommendation of exclusive breastfeeding for about 6 months, followed by continued breastfeeding as complementary foods are introduced, with continuation of breastfeeding for 1 year or longer as mutually desired by mother and infant” (from the *American Academy of Pediatrics 2012 Policy Statement on Breastfeeding and the Use of Human Milk*).

