

# Dads Do It Differently

By Sarah Bartrum

'Working together to give children the best of what both Mum and Dad can provide'

## Introduction

### Sharing Childcare

About a year ago, I was visiting my good friends Tracey and Mark. Tracey and I had agreed that we would have a rare day out together and leave our husbands Al and Mark to have a Dads' day with the kids. As I stood waiting to go, my friend Tracey was busy gathering coats and shoes for the kids, snacks from the kitchen, packing nappies and spare clothes. In between, shouting at Mark, about what he would need to do and when, with each of their children. I stood and waited. Al came over and gave me a hug goodbye. I waited some more. Mark stood puzzling over the pile of children's items growing in the hallway. Tracey appeared, one shoe on, one shoe off.

"What are you going to do for their lunch?" she said to Mark, and then before he could answer, "You can take some of the bread I baked this morning for sandwiches, Tim might not eat much if you go out."

"We haven't decided."

"Well you can't not eat, the kids will be hungry and need something by half twelve at the latest."

"Fine. They won't starve."

The tension in the hallway was getting palpably thicker.

"OK, I think I'm ready," Tracey tried to smile at me.

"Have you got *your* stuff?" I asked. The two of us were heading to the hills for a long walk. Tracey looked a little bewildered for a moment.

"Oh yes, I need a water bottle, hold on." She raced back to the kitchen and finally we left.

Reflecting on this experience I wondered if Tracey was just doing everything required of a responsible Mum, perhaps I was being lazy and expecting too much from my husband and should have provided more assistance to make sure he got the parenting 'right'.

If you are a Mum or Dad who shares parenting with your partner, you can probably see yourself as one of the four adults in the scenario above.

### Which parent are you?

<input type="checkbox"/>	I expect to be given clear instructions, a menu or pre-cooked food, children's clothes laid out and anything else I might possibly need while left in charge for the day. (In fact, its unlikely I'll be left in charge for a whole day).
<input type="checkbox"/>	I know exactly what to do. I don't need any instructions thank you very much. These are my children after all, and I do live here.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I'm worried that I forgot to hand everything over, I might need to ring to check that my partner hasn't forgotten little Lucy's gloves, it <i>is</i> very cold today, after all.
<input type="checkbox"/>	Great, a perfect day as I close the door and drive off for a relaxing day all to myself. I'm sure my partner and the kids will have a great day too.

As Tracey and I walked on the hills that day and she was able to unwind and enjoy the brisk weather, we talked about how we shared childcare with our partners.

Since that day, I have talked to lots of couples and families about how Dads and Mums share the workload. Through research and feedback from thousands more, I began to see a pattern. In today's world when its typical for both parents to work, and even when one parent is the "stay-at-home" Mum or Dad, we expect our partners to take a full share of the childcare, and when they don't, or don't do it "properly", fireworks ensue.

Childcare can be a very personal matter. Have you ever been to a friend's house and disagreed with how they disciplined their kids? Watched a mother or father react to their children in an inappropriate way walking down the high street? Wished that Grandma would stop letting the children eat so much cake? But how many of us would actually voice those concerns? Maybe we'll try a gentle approach with Grandma but not the others, childcare is just *too* personal.

So why, when it comes to our partners, does this rule not apply? Partners with children will argue about childcare more often than finances, annoying personal habits or virtually any other topic. A couple can be driven apart by their different approaches to childcare and the clashes they invoke. Yet our partners need to be our biggest ally in bringing up our children. Mums and Dads (whether they're biological or not) play a vital role in bringing up children. We need to do it right and we need to do it together.

### ***How To Use This Book***

There are various topics in this book that relate to particular areas of childcare where parenting styles are likely to differ, and around which arguments often arise. Each section provides exercises on how to overcome those differences. You can jump straight to a topic of difficulty for you and follow the exercises. If you read the book cover to cover, you will get a good overall insight into how Mums and Dads differ and how to work with those differences. At the end of the book, after you've gained a greater understanding of your differences is the chapter called "[Working Towards Solutions](#)". In that chapter, you will learn how to approach the differences with your partner and work towards an agreed solution no matter what area of childcare you are discussing. Remember the important point here is "discussing" not arguing. Being able to talk about childcare with your partner without getting emotional or blaming each other is a huge step towards making your family life more successful.

Finally if you are reading this book and don't yet have children, you have a wonderful opportunity to start your family life on the right foot. By reading this book, you may avoid a lot of the pitfalls of shared childcare. Instead you can start with a balanced relationship where each of you has the opportunity to learn about what being a parent really means with hands on experience. In this way, you can ensure that the only change you experience is the wonderful time of getting to know your new baby instead of arguing over her care.

### ***All Families***

It doesn't matter if you are not the biological mother or father of a child, if you are acting in a parenting role then consider yourself: a 'Mum' if you are a woman, and a 'Dad' if you are a man throughout this book. My intention is not to prejudice against all those wonderful complicated families where lots of different adults impact a child's life, in fact if you are a member of one of these, your work as a 'parent' and accepting the styles of the other

'parents' in a child's life is even more important. Working harmoniously together can only benefit the child.

Some of you reading this book will be divorced or separated and you may or not be the biological Mum or Dad, it really doesn't matter. The important point is that if you are sharing childcare with someone else, you need to be able to understand their parenting style as well as your own, communicate effectively about that childcare so that your child gets the benefit of having two or more involved parents in their life. There is never only one way to be a parent. Just as there is never only one kind of family.

### ***Mums Know Best...or do they?***

Watch any couple out with their new baby and see how many times Mum fusses, adjusts, feeds, tucks and does a million other little motions to make sure baby is just right. Compare that to the number of times Dad does the same. You'll soon see that Mums know best. Before the baby is even born, health professionals gear their information at Mums. Of course it's Mums who are about to have the baby and isn't it also the case that Mums are about to become the key carer? In many families this is true, but why is it that Mums need to be taught how to bath a newborn but Dads don't? Why are Mums told all about how good breast milk is and Dads aren't? One of the biggest factors in whether a Mum will succeed at breastfeeding is the support of Dad. To be fair, many of the professional services are changing slowly, the NHS antenatal classes recommend couples go together. Some of the literature is beginning to include Dads and the role they can play, but still ask any Dad what they thought of antenatal and they'll probably tell you they felt like a spare part. It's obvious, when it comes to babies, Mum knows best.

Thankfully this is a myth. Countless studies have proved that a newborn baby placed with its father will receive just as much personal care and attention as when with Mum. When Dads are given baby to look after, just like Mums, they have a steep learning curve. They learn, often by mistakes, how to ensure the nappy fits snugly, how to keep baby soothed and cuddle her off to sleep. How she likes her bottle, or when to hand her over to Mum for that all-important meal. Baby care is more about the opportunity to practice than it is about any innate ability. Given the same professional support, Dads too, can be the perfect parent. If Dads were only given the same amount of time to get to know their newborns than Mums, we would see a marked difference in the "who knows best" charts.

### ***Dads Do It Differently***

Two years ago, my friend Rachel and I were sat in the car chatting together in a car park. Our little ones were asleep in the back. As we sat there, we watched three children trotting along the pavement, laughing together. A girl of about seven dropped her scarf, but was so busy laughing and chasing the others that she didn't notice. Behind the children were two Dads. One of them snatched up the scarf from the ground and called out to the girl. She duly stopped and waited for her Dad to catch up. Dad lassoed his daughter, tied a knot securely at the back of her neck and gave her a push forwards. Off she ran again. Rachel and I looked at each other and giggled.

"Only a Dad would do that." I said.

"You're right," Rachel laughed, "Dad's just do it differently."

And so the idea for this book took shape. Rachel and I would never have lassoed our child like that, neither would we have knotted the scarf behind her neck. This got us thinking about what other things Dads do differently. Yet, as this example shows, the fact that Dads do it differently does not imply they do it any better or worse than Mums.

Let's look at the two perspectives in the example above:

<p><b>Mum's Perspective:</b> Scarf fell off. Scarf will get lost. Daughter will get cold.</p>	<p><b>Dad's Perspective:</b> Scarf fell off. Scarf will get lost.</p>
<p><b>Mum's Solution:</b> Carefully wrap scarf neatly round neck, maybe tuck ends into the front of her coat, remind daughter to take care of her things.</p>	<p><b>Dad's Solution:</b> Tie it on securely.</p>
<p><b>Mum's Result:</b> Scarf won't get lost.</p>	<p><b>Dad's Result:</b> Scarf won't get lost.</p>

So what? As we can see above Dads tend to have a different perspective to Mums. I expect you have already made up your mind which of the solutions above was the “better” one. However, they both provided satisfactory results. Who cares if the solutions are different? Lots of things are different between men and women and between unique personalities, just like my handwriting is different to your handwriting. So why write a book on how parenting styles differ? Well, you're unlikely to have an argument about your handwriting, or the way you brush your hair. Whereas, with childcare, Mums know best, don't they?

OK Mums, be honest. Have you ever pushed your partner aside because he didn't change baby's nappy properly, didn't make the pasta and sauce the way your daughter likes it, didn't follow the bedtime routine to the letter? You're beginning to get the picture. In this day and age where Mums and Dads share the breadwinning, they also share out the childcare, or try to. There have been many times when I've tried to teach my husband the correct methods of childcare. Why doesn't he listen, and why does he still do it his own way?

### ***Dads are important too!***

Fortunately we live in an age where more and more evidence is surfacing from a variety of sources on the value of Dads. We have moved away from the socio-biological view of what being a father means to a much more encompassing and understanding view of what Dads do, and how they impact their children's lives. This view has broadened to include men who play the “father” role who might not necessarily be a biological Dad. This is great news for step Dads, uncles, grandfathers, friends and other men who actively engage in children's lives. These men are now recognised as important factors in the development of children. A whole raft of specialists including psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, social workers and educationalists all agree, in the words of the Fatherhood Institute\*:

#### **What fathers do... matters to children**

This statement may make all those Dads out there feel good about themselves but the reverse is also true – what fathers don't do... matters to children too.

The fact that the Fatherhood Institute even exists suggests such importance in the lives of children. Organisations across the world are now actively engaged in promoting fathers' involvement in their families beyond the disciplinarian and breadwinner. Dads are seen as a vital component in the strength, happiness and security of families. They can impact childcare, child health and education. *According to Adrienne Burgess, author of*

Fatherhood Reclaimed: The Making of the Modern Father, the research shows that good enough fathering helps children develop:

- better friendships
- fewer behaviour problems
- better results at school
- higher self-esteem and life-satisfaction
- lower chance of becoming criminals or abusing drugs
- more satisfying adult relationships

OK, so there's lots of evidence from the research that Dads are important, but are they as good as Mums at the whole childcare thing? In short, Yes!

Typically when baby arrives, Mum spends a lot of time on her own getting to know him and figuring out what to do. With professional services, family and friends supporting her, she learns a lot in a short space of time. When Dads are given the same amount of support and the same amount of time with their new babies, they develop childcare skills at the same rate. There is also biological evidence showing that a crying or smiling baby raises the heart rate and blood pressure of Dad in exactly the same way as Mum.

*"What too many men (and women) don't realize is that to the extent that women are 'better' parents, it's simply because they've had more practice. In fact, the single most important factor in determining the depth of long-term father-child relationships is opportunity."*

-- Armin Brott

What we can conclude from all this is that Dads are important and can be as good as Mums at childcare, but unless they have the opportunity to be fully included, then our children won't receive the benefits of their input. Not to mention the benefits Mum receives from having an engaged partner sharing the responsibilities of childcare.

## Family Stress

Picture the following scenario; change any elements to fit your personal circumstances, possibly even swapping the Mum for the Dad in your situation:

Mum leaves work and collects the children from nursery or school and brings them home. They are sat at the kitchen table when Dad walks in.

### Take 1



"Daddy!" Johnny grins through a mouthful of mashed potato.

"Hello everyone." Dad walks around the table to get himself a drink.

"Hey Daddy, guess what?" Johnny adds eagerly.

"Just a minute." Dad turns his back, concentrating on pouring his drink.

"Daddy!"

"All right! Just wait." Dad's voice rises up a little.

"He just wants to tell you about his day." Mum sighs.

"I know, and I just want to get a drink OK?"

Isabel waves her spoon around and a piece of mashed potato flies off and sticks to Dad's shirt.

"For God's sake Isabel. Stop that!" he shouts.

"Don't shout at her, she's just trying to feed herself."

"I know." Dad sits down and holds Isabel's hand trying to guide it into the bowl.

"She doesn't like you holding her hand like that," says Mum.

"DADDY!" shouts Johnny.

“Right, that’s it, you feed Isabel. Johnny stop shouting at me. Let me know when they’ve had a bath. I’ll be in the lounge.”

“Great. Thanks a lot,” says Mum as Dad walks out.

Does this seem familiar? The end of the day for everyone can be stressful at the best of times and it only gets worse with demanding children and tired parents. This is the norm for many of us. The last part of the day with small children having tea and getting ready for bed can seem more stressful than a whole day at work. But read on, here is how the scenario could be played out:

Mum leaves work and collects the children from nursery or school and brings them home. They are sat at the kitchen table when Dad walks in.

## Take 2



“Daddy!” Johnny grins through a mouthful of mashed potato.

“Hello everyone.” Dad ruffles Johnny’s hair, bends down to give Isabel a kiss who’s waving her spoon around madly. “Keep that in the bowl Isabel.”

“How are you Mummy?” Dad walks around the table and gives Mum a hug.

“Not so bad,” she sighs.

“Hey Daddy, guess what?” Johnny adds eagerly.

“What?” Dad attempts to listen while pouring himself a drink then sits down at the table with everyone. Johnny launches into the latest of his adventures with Matthew in their space ship in the school playground. Dad listens, nodding his head and begins to help Isabel eat her food by guiding her wayward hand to the bowl and to her mouth. Mum gets up and begins to start clearing things away. Johnny pauses.

“How was your day love?” Mum asks turning around, now that Johnny isn’t filling the kitchen with his loud explanations.

“Good thanks,” Dad replies and then Johnny’s at it again.

“And Dad, listen, there’s this boy David and he said we weren’t astronauts because we don’t have helmets. But..” Johnny chatters on barely pausing for breath. Mum and Dad smile at each other.

“I’ll go and run the kids’ bath,” says Mum.

Dad nods and only just manages to catch Isabel’s bowl as it flies across the table.

So how is it possible to achieve this second scenario? Johnny is still desperate to tell his stories, Isabel still needs help with her over-zealous feeding and the parents are both tired, but in the second scenario, it’s only Johnny who’s talking too loudly as small children often do, and both parents are working together at this difficult time of day. This second scenario isn’t so far out of reach but it requires both parents to make some changes. Notice that it’s not the children who are behaving differently in either scenario, it is the parents who are different. It *is* possible to make childcare a less stressful experience and to truly share both the burden and joy of your children. If you can imagine saying one or more of the following, then reading this book could help you enjoy stronger and more loving relationships with both your partner *and* your children.

- My partner and I sometimes argue about the children
- She’s always telling me what to do
- He never does it properly and always leaves a mess
- I wish she’d leave me alone so I could have fun with the kids
- I’m always the one to sort the kids out
- She’s always moaning at me

- He never does anything
- They're MY children TOO
- I wish he'd stop winding the kids up
- I wish she'd stop criticising me
- They're HIS children TOO
- I don't trust him with the kids
- I never seem to be in charge until one of the kids is in big trouble
- Sometimes it's easier without him
- Sometimes it's easier to just let her get on with it

### ***The Solution***

That's what we all want, a quick fix, a solution so we don't keep arguing about the kids, so Dad and Mum are happy with each other's abilities and time with the kids. When we talk about relationships, we are essentially talking about how we watch, listen and talk to each other. It isn't easy to change the way we relate to someone, any change in behaviour takes time and effort to implement. Miracles can happen, but they need your dedication to create the magic. The goal of this book is to help both parents understand their different approaches to childcare, gain a greater respect for those different approaches and the benefits their children receive. And finally to provide exercises to change the way you relate to each other over childcare to improve your relationship with each other and with your children. Ultimately, to truly *share* the childcare and enjoy each other's contribution to your family's well being. Remember as parents, you are the key role models and the foundation for your family. What you do matters.

### ***Key Learning Points***

- **Myth – Mums Know Best**  
Research shows that given the opportunity, Dad can be just as perfect a parent as Mum.
- **Dads have the *same* innate parenting ability as Mums**  
By practicing and experiencing childcare, Mums and Dads can develop their skills at the *same* rate.
- **Biological or Non-Biological parent is NOT the key difference.**  
Biology is not as important as the role you play. What you DO as a parent is what really matters.
- **Dads Do It Differently**  
It's not better or worse parenting, it's just different parenting.
- **Dad's are Important.**  
Research shows that Dads are important in children's lives and they can have a big impact on things like self-esteem and future adult relationships. Don't underestimate the positive power of Dads.

#### *Further Reading*

Fatherhood Reclaimed: The Making of the Modern Father by Adrienne Burgess, Publisher, Year.