

## Basic Training for New Dads: The cord's cut, now what?

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In writing this article about the class I've developed for new dads, a funny thought occurred to me: My own dad's advice was always a bit of a mixed bag, and given that he was my model, who am I to give pointers? For example, at some point during the process of planning our wedding, my fiancée and I had some disagreement in which neither of us was giving any ground. It was getting stressful, so I asked my dad for his thoughts. Unexpectedly, he completely avoided the specifics of our impasse and asked me, "Have you spent your whole life thinking about how beautiful you'll look walking down the aisle in your wedding dress?" "No," I replied. "She has- that's why it's her day. You're just decoration, so stay out of it and let her run the show." Much to my wife's relief, I found that point hard to refute and capitulated. The wedding went off beautifully.

Seven years later, after our first son was born, things were getting a bit stressful again, so I sought out my dad's input on his own experience of being a new father. Once again, he sidestepped my specific questions entirely and said, "Right. Remember what I told you about your wedding day? Get used to the drill." Once again, the message was that I should step back and let my wife do it. A mixed bag indeed... To be fair, I'm pretty sure he was kidding, and over the years my dear old dad has really helped me to be a better son, brother, husband, and father. However, if I had actually applied the same principle of being a "good groom" to being a "good husband/father," I would have ended up

being a pretty checked-out dad. Luckily, he also taught me that “real men” roll around on the floor with their kids and give them big wet kisses as often as possible.

Another reason why I’m facilitating classes specifically for fathers of young babies comes from my own experience as an “expectant” dad. When my wife was pregnant with our older son, all of the “parenting” classes we found were mostly targeting mothers and women’s needs. Similarly, I noticed a pretty clear trend in the “advice” that my friends and family tended to offer me versus my wife. It went something like this: “Your life will never be the same again, your new responsibilities will prevent you from doing the things you like to do, and you’ll wish you could go back to your blissful childless state.” This input bugged me- even more so when I realized that the exact same people kept assuring my wife that she was about to enter a new magical, fulfilling phase of her life. Luckily, it turned out that these mixed messages we were receiving had more to do with other people’s stereotypes than with our actual experience. Still, those inconsistencies are at the heart of a catch-22 that is currently putting fathers of infants in a very difficult position.

The current generation of people having babies are very likely to have parents who came from households that embodied some version of the “Ozzie and Harriet” gender roles: Dad was the disciplinarian who went to work all day, and perhaps spent some quality time with the kids on the weekend once they were old enough for sports. Mom stayed home to raise the kids along with the other moms, and was the only one who openly showed emotions other than anger. The problem for the current generation of new fathers is that we’re being held to a much different standard than our own fathers were: We’re expected to be much more involved in raising our children. Why might this expectation be a potential problem? Because dealing with the stress of the adjustment to

parenthood can cause men to go on a kind of “autopilot” in which we emulate our own fathers’ out-of-date tactics. This kind of mismatch between one’s “daddy training” and the current social zeitgeist encouraging fathers to be open, available, and engaged has been said to result in something called ‘gender role strain.’ Gender role strain refers to the objective and perceived difficulties experienced as people engage in valued social roles. The strain is evident when fathers attempt to live up to contradictory standards that include, “be tough” and “be sensitive and loving.” We’ll return to that topic shortly.

Our history, media, and socialization shape us to see certain domains as being a natural fit for men: business, sports, hunting, fixing things, and monopolizing the remote control. Unfortunately, those same socializing influences also have the unfortunate by-products of encouraging men to be detached fathers by essentially feminizing the expressions of warmth and love. The Basic Training for New Dads class and my private practice provide ample examples of how the feminization of accessing, labeling, and expressing feelings can come from both men and women adjusting to the experience of having a newborn. One memorable example came during a couples session. The female client who had initiated the treatment because of “my husband’s communication problems” told him to “grow a pair” after he told her that “When you criticize me as a father, I feel hurt.”

Similarly, there have been many times when men in therapy have told me some version of the “evolutionary biology” argument: “I’m just not built that way- she wants to gush emotions, but I need to be alone to go hunt and gather.” Unfortunately, the “successful” fulfillment of those male role expectations in the context of fatherhood often results in negative consequences including low levels of family involvement and emotional unavailability. At the very time that babies, fathers, and

partners alike could really use some support, fathers often feel isolated and without the resources to define and adjust to their new roles.

I'd like to briefly digress in order to address the evolutionary argument against loyal, paternal fathers that I alluded to above. According to evolutionary psychology, most higher mammals do not pair bond because the females lactate and thus are able to rear the offspring by themselves. The males may help them and keep other males away but they don't bond with a single female or help with child care. However, even though human females do lactate, our offspring are so altricial ( i.e. helpless at birth and therefore requiring parental care for a period of time) that females need help to rear the children or the babies won't survive. Infants need care long after lactation is discontinued (through graduate school, in my case). So the next time someone wants to use the evolutionary "hard-wired" argument for male philandering or parental disengagement, be sure to note that he actually needs to look after his mate and highly altricial offspring! In all seriousness, people often use misguided "biological" principles such as these as the basis for their firmly-held ideas about gender and gender-appropriate behavior.

Violating gender role norms does lead to social condemnation, but generally has more severe consequences for males than for females. During the stressful transition to being a dad, taking on a nurturing, sensitive role for the first time may be uncomfortably close to characteristics often ascribed solely to women or gay men. Picture in your mind a man at a baby shower (I know it's a stretch, but work with me). Envision that same guy getting very excited when the expectant couple unwraps the blanket he bought for the baby, and imagine that he gushes, "Is that the softest material ever? I can't wait to have my own little baby to wrap up in a cute blanket just like it!" Now, imagine

that his wife said the same thing. If you thought the guy's behavior was a little odd- but the woman's wasn't- that's the voice of gender role strain. Avoiding behaviors that go against society's stereotypes can manage one's anxiety in the short-term, but may also result in serious problems in the long-term.

Most of the information presented here so far paints a pretty bleak picture for the men facing new fatherhood these days. Fortunately, my experience and training have led me to the conclusion that men's proscribed gender roles are neither biological nor social givens, but rather psychological and social constructions. I feel lucky to have had first-hand experience watching new fathers come to realize that they are hugely important to the development of their kids, and actually have a lot to offer their children, partners, and families as a whole. The reality is that men these days can make excellent fathers- however, they rarely seem to take the time to reflect on how to go about doing it, exactly.

Three years ago, Jeff Jones, Ph.D. came to talk with my Pre-doctoral Internship class about men's issues, the psychology of masculinity, and fatherhood. His presentation really blew me away. After getting licensed and completing my Post-doctoral Fellowship at UCSD, I cold-called Jeff and asked him for some career advice. After telling him a bit about myself, he very matter-of-factly said, "You're a young psychologist and a new father. Why not put together a class or group for new fathers?" Apparently, my years of career counseling practica and training had quickly receded. Once I got over feeling sheepish about not having thought of the class myself, I got very excited about the idea and spent the next several months developing it with Jeff.

The Basic Training for New Dads (BTND) class is essentially the sequel to Jeff's Basic Training for Dads to Be class for "expectant" fathers. Fathers of newborn through 1-year olds sign up to attend the BTND class in groups of 6-8 at a time. It is basically a place for them to talk about their experiences and to try out some hands-on techniques aimed at helping them to feel more confident about staying engaged with their very young children.

The first two-hour class is "Dads Only," and takes place on a weeknight. It involves a facilitated discussion about the issues facing many new fathers: work/family balance, developmental milestones ("Is my kid normal?"), managing stress, relationship changes, post-partum depression (in both men and women), advice for dealing with the extended family ("If you want to stay with us right now, we're putting you to work!"), establishing routines, and a whole host of practical issues (getting sleep, baby-proofing, etc). Each class discussion is different because the dads guide the discussion. I see my role as basically providing a loose structure so that the dads can feel more comfortable engaging each other. At the end of the first class, the dads go around and answer three questions: "What was something you heard here that you found helpful?", "Who dad said it?" and "What's a specific skill that you want to work on next class when you bring your baby with you?" Their answers to these questions reveal what they've already gotten out of the class, what they learned from the other dads, and what else they want to know.

The second class is called the "Dads Lab" because fathers bring their babies for a hands-on, three-hour learning experience on the Saturday morning after the first class. They get the chance to practice specific skills with their own babies, and they also learn by watching how the other dads manage situations similar to their own. In addition to the specific questions dads bring to the class,

topics covered include: interactive play techniques, infant massage, changing diapers, positive discipline, swaddling, and establishing routines. These are skills that set the foundation for lasting bonds with children. Beyond the tips and resources that they take away from the experience, every dad who takes part has the two-fold benefit of knowing that he had a morning's worth of quality time with his baby, and also had the rare opportunity to see a whole roomful of other dads doing the same thing. Plus, the dads' partners get the morning off, and I'm always certain to get the class done in time for the fathers to watch the game that afternoon.

My own clinical work and research are heavily influenced by Social Cognitive Theory, and SCT suggests that the ideal approach here is to provide new dads with skills and a sense of efficacy for solving their own problems. The scientist-practitioner in me formulates the fathers' experience in the class this way: in receiving a reinforcing response for interacting appropriately with his child- and seeing other fathers doing the same- participants in the BTND class experience increased "daddy self-efficacy" via modeling and learning experiences (both direct and vicarious). This increased self-efficacy encourages more exploration and agency in the role of a father. Basically, dads are more confident about staying involved with their young babies.

Dr. Bandura might be annoyed that I referred to a general sense of self-efficacy without a specific behavioral referent (he's repeatedly asserted that self-efficacy is domain- and activity-specific). However, I believe he would agree that having dads take a morning to spend quality time with their babies and other dads in a supportive environment would be pretty likely to result in them feeling more confident about interacting with their babies. Beyond my scientist-practitioner role, the father in me had an even more selfish reason for developing this class. I wasn't able to find a play group for

new dads for my son, so I did what any psychologist in my situation might do- I went out and got a grant to set one up for myself!

I have gotten great feedback from the dads who participate in the class each month. It's very rewarding to see dads making connections with their children and with each other. Most of them tend to have an "Aha!" moment at some point during the class as they realized some new way to handle a question or concern. For me, being a father has turned out to be even more meaningful and challenging than I could have ever imagined. Raising two little boys is definitely a full-time job, but I am happy to say that my own father's legacy is alive and well in our household: My sons get big, wet kisses every time I see them.

For more information on the BTND class, please visit our website [www.newdadsclass.com](http://www.newdadsclass.com). You can also contact Danny Singley at 858 344-4698 or [dsingley@newdadsclass.com](mailto:dsingley@newdadsclass.com)

Danny Singley is a member of the SDPA Men's Issues Committee and the Web Development Committee.

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