

FATHER TIME

Society must change its perception of fathers as breadwinners and acknowledge their need to be involved with child-rearing from birth to raise healthy children

WORDS // MIKE BRUCE

Ryan Gill is often there, one of the few dads, sometimes the only one: the kindy and school routine, volunteering at school swimming, ballet lessons and play dates. He knows the meal routines for his three girls Isla, 6, Helena, 4, and Carys, 2, he insists on reading the bedtime story and is determined to be there for the special moments and memories.

Gill, 39, is not a stay-at-home father but a busy airline employee. He is what society refers to nowadays as an "involved" father, possibly a strange tag in the enlightened days of two-parent-working households.

Gill's motivation springs from two sources. Foremost, he is determined to be a hands-on dad. Secondly, he works a roster which, for about 16 days a month, has him away overnight and/or leaving his Wavell Heights, Brisbane, home early and returning late. As enticing as the notion of nights away from three spirited little girls may sound, it is mostly cause for frustration. "You miss your wife and kids terribly when you're away," Gill says. "A night in a hotel and a meal out might sound tempting to many dads but, in reality, you just want to be home with your wife and kids."

Ironically, as punishing as that roster can be, it also provides him slabs of time to be a present dad. Involved. Perhaps, most importantly, it allows him and wife Michelle to have significant time to co-parent, that is, where both mother and father are substantially involved in child-rearing activities.

Acknowledgment of the benefits of co-parenting has been around for some time. But evidence on the positive social, emotional and educational outcomes for children is mounting to a point where society, and particularly workplaces, must change, says fathering advocate Adrienne Burgess.

Society must acknowledge that fathers are not just corporate thrusters and breadwinners, but also parents and nurturers who must actively and intentionally raise their children, she argues.

Burgess, who visits Queensland to host parenting workshops this month, heads Britain's Fatherhood Institute (FI), a body focused on fathering policy, research and practice. It states as one of its goals: a society that "gives all children a strong and positive relationship with their father and any father-figures".

FI advises workplaces and governments, including Downing Street, on the crucial need to acknowledge and accommodate fathers as carers.

Burgess talks about co-parenting in terms of societal garlic, a simple but potent cure-all for many of society's ills. She reels off the studies and statistics with an energy tinged with frustration.

Children of involved fathers are more likely to live in cognitively stimulating homes and have higher IQs. Children of fathers who engage with their schools do better educationally and have fewer behavioural problems. Children whose fathers who read to them are less likely to have literacy problems.

Early literacy problems are linked to scholastic dysfunction in higher grades. Involved dads learn more about their child and are consequently warmer and more sensitive to the child.

On it goes, paper after paper and finding after finding to support the premise.

Queensland-born Burgess emigrated to Britain at 18, where she had a successful stage and TV acting career before turning her hand to feature writing. In the mid-90s a publisher asked her to write a book. Any book. She suggested something on fathering, because she had established most of the fathering books in mid-90s Britain were comedic affairs that parodied fatherhood as a bumbling journey of incompetence and flatulence.

She picked up on themes in an earlier book by academic Charlie Lewis, *Becoming A Father*, which showed how fathers had been systematically shut out of parenting, from the labour ward to the schoolroom, a process she calls "lessons in exclusion".

"As I read his book, I came to understand what was happening," Burgess says. "It wasn't only that mothers were being dragooned into this role of carer, but men were being pushed out of it. No wonder there was this terrible conflict, and mothers feeling terribly overloaded, and all these men feeling excluded."

"It's still the case ... all built on biology."

Over the past 14 years, Burgess and FI have worked with practitioners, midwives, counsellors, maternity nurses and social workers, particularly those working in domestic violence, to help them engage better with men in families, in the latter case to prevent further violence and, in extreme cases, even infanticide.

"Social workers are not very good at engaging with men."

"They are scared of them, think they can't change them, think they're all rubbish and so often they get involved only with the mum and send her on a parenting course ... amazingly often they don't even get the name of the guy she's living with."

Inclusion of fathers must occur from birth, Burgess says, but often that inclusion is stifled by maternal health nurses who shut fathers out of those vital, early child-rearing discussions.

"What fathers do matters absolutely from day one."

"Children whose fathers are highly involved in all kinds of childcare tasks, like feeding and changing nappies, have higher IQs at age one and do better at school," Burgess explains.

Burgess says the FI mantra is sometimes misconstrued as men's rights. She is quick to point out that co-parenting and involving fathers is neither about men's rights, nor about even being fair to men. It's about being fair to the whole family.

"When fathers are more involved, two things happen: the mother feels more supported and parents more effectively."

"One of the most important impacts on the child is from the father via the mother. If the father is part of the team and the mother feels confident in leaving the child with him, then she relaxes. She can parent better and more positively."

Gill could not agree more.

"Knowing Michelle can walk out the door at any stage of any day for an appointment, see a friend or anything she might want to do on her own and she doesn't have to worry, is comforting."

"She doesn't have to think about it ... she knows I can do it because I am doing it a lot of the time. That enables her to focus on what she's got to do. That's a massive plus."

Adrienne Burgess hosts two one-day workshops on working with fathers at Relationships Australia Queensland on February 18 and 19. For details, visit raq.org.au



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