

How Can I Trust Him? Men as Caregivers

Notes based on discussion at MSPCC, Holyoke, 9 June 2009

We often don't trust men to take care of children. Broadly, we can look at this along three main axes:

1. Men are seen as a violent or sexual threat—a danger to physically or sexually abuse a child.
2. Men are seen as unreliable. That is, “well, he *says* he's going to take care of the kid but last time I trusted him to do that. . .”
3. Men are seen as “incompetent” around kids—in quotes because competence often means *the right way is my way and your way is wrong*.

These concerns are neither trivial nor artificial: men *are* more violent than women; while there is a subjective element to “reliability,” men do vastly less childcare than women; and while “competence” can be either subjective or wielded as a cudgel in defending territory, men are certainly not socialized to be caregivers with the same consistency and intensity that women are.

Why Should We Care About How Men Are Seen?

Men being viewed as a threat to children is a significant barrier to integrating fathers more thoroughly into caregiving—and thus creating a balance that facilitates both children's healthy development and women's professional progress. Both addressing the genuine issues of threat, reliability, and competence, and projecting and perpetuating a more positive image of men in caregiving roles is an important goal for creating healthier families.

What Concrete Steps Can We Take?

The nature of the problem dictates a multi-polar approach. To be effective we have to change: how men/fathers see themselves; how women/mothers see fathers; and the broader public profile of active fathers.

1. Fathers can do something to dissipate the (real and imagined) threat of men by:

- Modeling responsible and nurturing behavior for
 - Our children (seeding generational change)
 - Our families (modeling alternative family culture)
 - Our peers/in public (normalizing a more complete, well rounded masculinity)

2. Practitioners can provide education/support to fathers to help make them competent caretakers, and to provide concrete reassurance, to mothers and other women, that (at least some) men are nurturing, responsible, and effective parents.
3. All of us can more openly address concerns about men (“taking care” of that anxiety even if you don't think it has a reasonable basis), and by publicly questioning/rebutting stereotypes about male incompetence around issues of caretaking (in the same way that one might make a point of responding to stereotypes about women being incompetent with something more traditionally associated with men—like operating heavy machinery, for example).