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Behavior

A boy for you, a girl for me

"The father's role in early child care has been largely neglected and underrated," says Norma L. Radin of the University of Michigan. A four-year-old boy may spend more time with his mother but it's his father's behavior, she says, that seems to shape the child's motivation and ability to learn. Pre-schoolers and their mothers were tested first. A mother's nurturant behavior-warmth, responsiveness to the child's needs and feelings, the use of praise and reward and inclusion in decision-making-seemed to foster mental development in daughters but had no apparent effect on the learning processes of sons. Next, 180 fathers and their four-year-olds were interviewed. A similar pattern was found. Fathers who drew their sons into the conversation, answered their demands, asked their opinions and praised their responses had sons who scored high on the achievement tests that were administered later. Among fathers and daughters there was a less positive behavior pattern. The fathers would sometimes respond to their daughters' questions and demands and sometimes ignore them. They would alternate reasonable requests with unexplained orders and threats.

The research suggests that the contradictory nature of a father's behavior toward his daughter may be the reason why he has no impact on the girl's mental development. It's the quality, not the quantity of time that a parent spends with young children that is important, the researchers conclude.

Voting on homosexuality

Gay activists achieved what they called a "psychiatric turnaround" in December when the American Psychiatric Association's board of trustees voted to remove homosexuality from its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (SN: 12/29/73, p. 389). But the turnaround was not as complete as the gay groups would have liked. What they had hailed as an "instant cure" was delayed by members of the APA who disagreed with the board's decision. One New York psychiatrist called the board's action the "medical hoax of the century." Two and one half million years of evolution have programmed humans to mate with the opposite sex, he said, and the survival of any society depends on that. This type of argument from within the APA forced an unusual referendum. For the first time in APA history, the members had to vote on a board decision. With almost 10,000 psychiatrists voting, the board was upheld by 58 percent of the members, and homosexuality was not redefined as a sickness.

TOPS and behavior mod

TOPS (Take Off Pounds Sensibly) is a 25-year-old self-help organization for the obese. It has 320,000 members, but like many such organizations, its effectiveness is limited. Behavior modification is more effective than traditional methods of treating obesity, but it has not been widely applied. Researchers have tested the advisability of applying behavior mod through TOPS.

Each subject in four chapters of TOPS was asked to keep a detailed record of food intake. Therapists reviewed these records and helped the subjects to change their eating habits. In the April American Journal of Psychiatry the researchers report that, compared with control groups, behavior-mod groups had fewer dropouts and greater weight loss during and after treatment.

Science News, Vol. 105