

Fatherhood in transition . . .

For years social scientists were interested in fathers only when they were absent from their families. But as women have taken on an expanded role outside the family, fathers—willingly or reluctantly—have assumed a more important role within the family, as homemaker and care giver. How is the egalitarian family working out, and what have been the consequences for parents who pioneer in such roles?

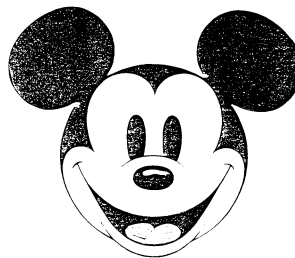
For the past three years, psychologists Carolyn Pape Cowan and Philip A. Cowan of the University of California at Berkeley have been studying couples who are going through the transition to parenthood, in order to determine the effects of different family arrangements on the parents' psychological well being. They have followed 100 families, assessing each partner during the pregnancy, six months and 18 months after the child's birth. They have found that fathers who take a more active parenting role think better of themselves, are more satisfied with their marriage, and view parenting as less stressful. In addition, the wives of these fathers were less depressed than the wives of more traditional fathers. They also found that the more involved fathers (at 18 months) were working less than they had in late pregnancy, and that their wives were working more. While such job flexibility did permit fathers to become more actively involved with their infants, Cowan and Cowan report, egalitarianism was not without a price: these same fathers reported more strain than traditional fathers in juggling their roles as parent, husband and worker. Being an involved father is satisfying, they conclude, but it isn't easy.

Although it might be tempting to recommend father involvement as a way to increased life satisfaction, Cowan and Cowan say, the data show that psychological well-being actually precedes and predicts involvement and satisfaction in fatherhood. They also found that men who anticipated being involved fathers did indeed become involved, and that men with such expectations tended already to be more involved in the family as homemakers. Cowan and Cowan found that, even in the most egalitarian families, both husband and wife predicted that the husband would be more involved in baby care than in fact he turned out to be. Indeed the overall data on actual hours spent in child care call into question the whole notion that parenting is undergoing a major change: on the average, fathers were spending 26 hours per week with their babies, while mothers were spending an average of 121 hours per week.

. . . but sex roles remain

Not only do fathers spend considerably less time with their infants, but they also use that time differently, according to University of Vermont psychologist Phyllis Bronstein. The time fathers spend with infants tends to be play time, whereas mothers (who spend more time than fathers playing with their infants) spend proportionally more time involved in various childrearing tasks. Furthermore, Bronstein says, fathers play differently with sons and daughters. Fathers talk more to their sons, touch them more, and their play with their sons is more vigorous, physical and stimulating. These patterns develop in the first two years of life, Bronstein says, so that very early on children are offered very different views of males and females. Females are always there, they attend to needs, and they are soothing. Males come and go, and when they are present, life is more exciting. "Does this early kind of father-son interaction have anything to do with the findings that, throughout childhood, boys consistently show more gross motor play activity, and more impulsive behavior than girls?" Bronstein asks. "Does it have anything to do with the fact that from toddlerhood on, many more males show up in hospital emergency rooms for treatment of injury, and that the accidental death rate is much higher for males than for females? We can only speculate."

Psychologist reports that mouse ages



was presented by psychologist John P. Murray of Boys Town Center in Nebraska.

Murray believes Mickey Mouse's metamorphosis "from a small rodent named Mortimer in 1927 . . . to a pre-eminent position in the entertainment industry" mirrored the life and spirit of Disney himself. "In his earlier roles, Mickey was a plucky, scrappy youngster out for a good time and willing to take chances. . . . Later in his professional life when career and company were becoming well-established, the Disney version of Mickey Mouse became more subdued," Murray said. "No longer the youthful picadillos and lustful pursuit of Minnie Mouse for Mickey, but rather, as he rolled into young adulthood and middle age, a more sober, staid and suburban mouse."

Murray traced Mickey's history from the early, carefree years through the 1940s and 1950s, when the mouse began to wear suits and "engage in exotic adventures with the Secret Service," up into the 1960s and 1970s, where "he has moved to a slower-paced, more recreational lifestyle of fishing and golfing with friends." Murray noted. "Perhaps one might even call it a pre-retirement wind down." Now, he said, "Mickey has moved into more senior adult managerial positions."

Video games and preschoolers

Hollywood has speculated upon an exotic "WarGames" scenario—where a high school student taps into a defense computer and almost triggers World War III. Now, psychologists are beginning to examine more mundane, but potentially serious, effects of computers and video games on the behavior and attitudes of young people. "Computer games have rapidly taken over almost all aspects of life," says William Strein, a psychologist at the University of Maryland in College Park. "More importantly, they've rapidly moved into the classroom as methods of instruction and as rewards for learning."

Strein and William Kachman were concerned that the "very competitive" nature of video games might increase competitiveness and inhibit social interaction among preschoolers. In their study of 26 4- and 5-years-olds, Strein and Kachman observed the youngsters' behavior in three computer games modes: Cooperative, where two children were to work together to guide astronauts from a rocket to a space station; competitive, where the children alternated to see who could get more astronauts aboard; individualistic, where one child played alone.

Strein reported that the results, disappointingly, were not statistically significant. While this could mean that the games did not affect the youngsters' behavior in any way, Strein suggested that the problem was that too few children were used and too few experimental tests employed. Moreover, he said, the researchers did notice some trends as the testing sessions progressed: Children in the cooperative test group became somewhat more cooperative and those in the competitive group became slightly more competitive.

Strein also acknowledged the hazards of working with preschoolers. Some did not follow instructions, and would cooperate in the competitive test and vice versa. Several children sent the astronauts hurtling into the infinity of space just to see what would happen. "Some of the kids got bored," Strein said.