

Mother Knows Best?

Women are good at looking after children because they do it. It's not because of any innate female aptitude.

By John Hoffman

Originally published in Today's Parent, June 2003.

Once while being prepped for a television interview, I was chatting with the host about stay-at-home fathers. I made the point that one reason we're seeing more stay-at-home dads these days may be that it's no longer a given that a man makes more money than his wife. Many families take earning power into account when deciding which parent will stay home.

At that point, one of the male crew members commented - almost to himself but loud enough for my benefit, I'm sure: "It should be the better parent who stays home." I've heard a lot of guys say things like that. Usually it's code for, "my wife (read: any woman) is the better parent."

I was a stay-at-home father for eight years. So, yeah, his declaration made me bristle. It implied that our family's choice could only have been correct if I was a "better" parent than my wife.

First, it's a rather simple-minded approach to the decision about which parent - if either - should stay home with the kids. But, more importantly, I think men (I've never heard a woman say anything like this) shoot themselves in the foot with this kind of thinking.

I suppose you could make an argument that, when I began staying home, my wife was the "better" parent. She had spent more time with Ry, could read him a little better and calm him more quickly; given a choice, he'd have picked her over me. Even so, she, being the more employable one, went out to work - actually, she went upstairs to our home office (that's a story in itself) - and I looked after him most days.

Know what happened? I caught up. In fact, if anything, my staying home was a bonus for my kids because they still got lots of their mom (I also reject the tiresome notion that working mothers are not involved with their children) and they also got more out of me. Because of the increased time I spent with them, I knew them well, understood what they needed and could look after them more or less as well as my wife could. In some cases - certainly in mine - a low-earning man has a much better chance of bringing

his parenting skills in line with his wife's than he has of matching her income.

Actually, this experience helped me unlock one of the world's great secrets. Women are good at looking after children because they do it. It's not because of any innate female aptitude, nor because of mother's instinct, which I think is mostly learned anyway. It's because they put in the time and attention required to become good at the job. Obviously women get a biological head start from giving birth and nursing, but over the long term, experience is more important. When I got the experience myself, I was good too. As good? I don't know. Who cares? The question is not worth asking. Children are not made of glass. Lots of people are capable of looking after them besides mom. History proves that.

Here's a bigger concern: Our assumption about mothers' superior competence can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, which in turn keeps fathers in a secondary position in their children's lives.

The pattern starts early. The baby is born. Mom figures out what to do quickly because she has no choice. Soon she's established as the more competent parent. It's easy to let the more capable one do everything because it's faster and more efficient. But if the "better" (if we must) parent always does it, "number two" never gets any better. The father feels out of the loop, or has little confidence in his skills, or feels he is being corrected all the time. There's a real temptation to settle into the role of the sub.

Fathers can be much more than that; many already are. There's nothing wrong with displaying a high regard for your partner's parenting skills. But when men assume that their partner is the better parent, they set themselves up for a life sentence as second best. It doesn't have to be that way.