



Both a father and a mother are needed to create life, and both are needed to best facilitate the nurturing of that life. Dennis Smith, *First Child*, bronze, 1978, located southwest of the Wilkinson Student Center just east of the Herald R. Clark Building, Brigham Young University campus, Provo, Utah. Photograph by Cooper Douglass.

It Takes Two

What We Learn from Social Science about the Divine Pattern of Gender Complementarity in Parenting

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Introduction

In 2006, Canadian fathering scholar Andrea Doucet shared an illuminating moment from her extensive research with single dads. After a long evening discussing these fathers' experiences, Doucet asked, "In an ideal world, what resources or supports would you like to see for single fathers?" She expected to hear that they wanted greater social support and societal acceptance, more programs and policies directed at single dads. Instead, after a period of awkward silence, one dad stood and said, "An ideal world would be one with a father and a mother. We'd be lying if we pretended that wasn't true."¹ Nods of agreement and expressions of approval followed from the other dads. Although many had had bitter experiences of separation and divorce, they could not ignore the inherent connectedness of mothering and fathering—and the profound deficit experienced when one or the other is not there. They knew because they lived it. Both a father and a mother are needed to create life, and as described by Doucet's fathers and the doctrine of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, both are needed to best facilitate the nurturing of that life.²

1. Andrea Doucet, *Do Men Mother? Fathering, Care, and Parental Responsibilities* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 215.

2. See also Paul Raeburn, *Do Fathers Matter? What Science Tells Us about the Parent We've Overlooked* (New York: Scientific American and Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014).

Doctrinal Foundation for Gender Complementarity

The biblical account of Creation presents us with a profound insight into Deity regarding the importance of the two genders. “In the beginning,” God orders creation through a series of differentiations and separations (Gen. 1:1). We find his holy ordering in the separation and complementarity of heaven and earth, light and dark, day and night, morning and evening, clouds and seas, water and dry land. This essence of creation is captured in the Hebrew designation for God himself, *Kadosh*, meaning differentiated, separated, designated for a special purpose.³

At Creation’s pinnacle, we are presented with the differentiation of male and female, wholly distinct and complementary, each bearing the image of God, *imago Dei*. “In the beginning,” we learn that eternity is composed of a holy ordering of complementary realities, culminating in male and female, in whose union we see the eternal God. In the concept of *Kadosh*, they are separated that ultimately they might become pure, sacred, holy, eternally *one*. Elder Erastus Snow recognized this holy ordering in speaking of one of the most distinctive and profound of Latter-day Saint doctrines: “There can be no God except he is composed of the man and woman united, and there is not in all the eternities that exist, nor ever will be, a God in any other way. I have another description: There never was a God, and there never will be in all eternities, except they are made of these two component parts; a man and a woman; the male and the female.”⁴

The eternal reality of male and female, which Elder Bruce D. Porter once described as “woven into the fabric of the universe, a vital, foundational element of eternal life and divine nature,”⁵ is a concept also deeply embedded in non-Christian cultural understandings. The ancient Chinese philosophy of yin and yang describes how the contrary, complementary forces of feminine and masculine energy compose all of nature, interacting to create a whole that is greater than the sum of their individual parts.

This concept is not unfamiliar to Latter-day Saints. Elder Boyd K. Packer described the complementing differences between men and women as “the very key to the plan of happiness.”⁶ This understanding

3. Neil Gillman, *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 229.

4. Erastus Snow, in *Journal of Discourses*, 26 vols. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1855–86), 19:270 (March 3, 1878).

5. Bruce D. Porter, “Defending the Family in a Troubled World,” *Ensign* 41, no. 6 (June 2011): 13.

6. Boyd K. Packer, “For Time and All Eternity,” *Ensign* 23, no. 11 (November 1993): 21.

is fundamental to our doctrinal understanding of marriage and has been repeatedly affirmed by apostles and prophets. In the words of Elder Richard G. Scott, “in the Lord’s plan, it takes two—a man and a woman—to form a whole. Indeed, a husband and wife are not two identical halves, but a wondrous, divinely determined combination of complementary capacities and characteristics. Marriage allows these different characteristics to come together in oneness—in unity—to bless a husband and wife, their children and grandchildren. . . . Their efforts interlock and are complementary.”⁷

Elder David A. Bednar said, “Because of their distinctive temperaments and capacities, males and females each bring to a marriage relationship unique perspectives and experiences. The man and the woman contribute differently but equally to a oneness and a unity that can be achieved in no other way. The man completes and perfects the woman and the woman completes and perfects the man as they learn from and mutually strengthen and bless each other.”⁸

Sister Linda K. Burton further clarified this concept using the metaphor of our hands to explain the meaning of the Hebrew phrase for “help meet” (*ezer kenegdo*): “We know from the scriptures that ‘it is not good that . . . man should be alone.’ That is why our Heavenly Father made ‘an help meet for him.’ The phrase *help meet* means ‘a helper suited to, worthy of, or corresponding to him.’ For example, our two hands are similar to each other but not exactly the same. While opposites, they complement each other and are suited to each other. Working together, they are stronger.”⁹

Sister Sheri Dew, as a single woman, spoke similarly of this principle: “Our Father knew exactly what He was doing when He created us. He made us enough alike to love each other, but enough different that we would need to unite our strengths and stewardships to create a whole. Neither man nor woman is perfect or complete without the other.”¹⁰ Her words echoed instruction by President Spencer W. Kimball decades earlier: “In his wisdom and mercy, our Father made men and women dependent on

7. Richard G. Scott, “The Joy of Living the Great Plan of Happiness,” *Ensign* 26, no. 11 (November 1996): 73–74.

8. David A. Bednar, “Marriage Is Essential to His Eternal Plan,” *Ensign* 36, no. 6 (June 2006): 83–84.

9. Linda K. Burton, “We’ll Ascend Together,” *Ensign* 45, no. 5 (May 2015): 30, emphasis original.

10. Sheri L. Dew, “It Is Not Good for Man or Woman to Be Alone,” *Ensign* 31, no. 11 (November 2001): 13.

each other for the full flowering of their potential. Because their natures are somewhat different, they can complement each other; because they are in many ways alike, they can understand each other.” He then instructed that we “discern what is superficial and what is beautifully basic in those differences, and act accordingly.”¹¹

Cultural Questions and Social Science Responses

These spiritual statements come at a time when strong cultural messages assert that the differences between men and women are largely artifacts of society’s creation. Uncovering society’s role in creating and maintaining gender definitions and differences has been important, particularly in exposing problematic assumptions that limit the development, influence, and equality of women in the full range of social spheres.

But the lens of social construction has gone so far as to suggest that in fact there are no differences, that men and women are interchangeable, that there are no distinctions that add value in their coming together. As researcher Judith Stacey said, “The gender of parents only matters in ways that don’t matter.”¹²

In this cultural debate, Church members may have been led to ask whether there really are differences. And if there are, what are they and why do they matter? How are we to understand statements that men and women “contribute differently but equally” through a “combination of complementary capacities and characteristics”?¹³ How are we to understand our Latter-day Saint belief that gender is an essential characteristic of our premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose?

The purpose of this paper is to review what social science research indicates about the distinctive, complementary contributions mothers and fathers make to the development of children. In doing so, it provides a lens into the complementary nature of distinct gender differences between men and women, and how together they create a oneness that is unique to the combination of male and female, mother and father.

11. Spencer W. Kimball, “Relief Society—Its Promise and Potential,” *Ensign* 6, no. 3 (March 1976): 5.

12. Judith Stacey, quoted in Allison Hope, “Don’t Fall into the Nuclear Family ‘Parent Trap’: What Kids Need Most Is Love,” July 14, 2021, CNN Health, accessed March 31, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/14/health/kids-parents-love-wellness-opinion/index.html>; see also Timothy J. Biblarz and Judith Stacey, “How Does the Gender of Parents Matter?,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 72, no. 1 (February 2010): 3–22.

13. Bednar, “Marriage Is Essential to His Eternal Plan,” 84; Scott, “Joy of Living the Great Plan of Happiness,” 74.

Limitations of Social Science Research

The research discussed here is largely based on observations of mothers' and fathers' different psychological orientations and behaviors in parenting, as well as analyses that attempt to isolate how maternal and paternal presence and behaviors predict outcomes in children. As with all research, there are limitations to what it can conclude. First, there is no question that there is a tremendous amount of variability within gender. That is, not all mothers and fathers are going to parent in the ways these studies found to be typical. What does appear to be clear is that even if a mother or father does not parent in a way that appears to be "consistent" with typical patterns, in the process of parenting together a mother and a father tend to take complementary approaches, almost with an intuitive sense that children need the difference between them, even if that difference is not typical of others.

More research is needed to understand how biological processes interact with cultural and social influences to shape the distinct ways in which mothers and fathers influence children's development. Parenting behavior is "clearly influenced" by biological processes, including the profound biological changes mothers experience in the process of carrying a fetus, giving birth, and sustaining life and that fathers experience through closeness with their partner and in their paternal involvement.¹⁴ But these biological processes happen within a social and cultural ecology that also appears to profoundly shape the way mothers and fathers relate to their children.¹⁵ More cross-cultural research is needed to tease out the degree to which the observed differences between mothers and fathers are socially constructed differences or consistent across all cultures, indicating something about the inherent natures of fathers and mothers.

As with all statistical approaches, it is difficult to fully isolate a predictor's effect or to determine causality of a result. The studies reviewed herein have used strong methodologies that indicate meaningful correlations and, in some cases, some level of causality between maternal and paternal presence and behaviors and specific outcomes. But those findings do not eliminate the need for caution in suggesting that mothers or fathers *cause* certain outcomes.

14. Ross D. Parke, "Gender Differences and Similarities in Parental Behaviors," in *Gender and Parenthood: Biological and Social Scientific Perspectives*, ed. W. Bradford Wilcox and Kathleen Kovner Kline (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 135.

15. Parke, "Gender Differences and Similarities," 121–63.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, though these findings provide insight into the ways in which men and women “contribute differently but equally” through a “combination of complementary capacities and characteristics”¹⁶ to the sacred purposes of marriage and family life, we should not expect mortal experiences captured in social science to define eternal verities. We know from the Proclamation on the Family that “gender is an essential characteristic of individual premortal, mortal, and eternal identity and purpose,”¹⁷ but prophetic revelation has not confirmed the specific ways in which the gendered natures of men and women may differ or whether men and women have distinct gender roles or purposes in the eternities. The biological, psychological, and sociological differences experienced in mortality may contain shadows of whatever constitutes the eternal gender that predates our mortal experience.

Evidence for Complementarity in Maternal and Paternal Influences

It is clear that both parents are capable of providing the essential nurturing, feeding, stimulation, teaching, and guidance needed for children to become competent adults. In fact, observational studies indicate that mothers and fathers show striking patterns of similarity in nurturing infants and that infants can form essential emotional attachments with both fathers and mothers. Across development, there is tremendous overlap in how a mother and father influence children’s development.¹⁸

But research also reveals how fathers’ and mothers’ distinct “genetically, anatomically, [and] hormonally influenced predispositions” contribute to different psychological orientations, strengths, and styles of interaction with children.¹⁹ The patterns of gender differences that emerge are not necessarily fixed, reflecting social, cultural, and historical factors as well as biological ones. As fathering scholar Ross D. Parke summarizes in his review of gender differences and similarities in parenting, this combination of factors shapes what research has found to

16. Bednar, “Marriage Is Essential to His Eternal Plan,” 84; Scott, “Joy of Living the Great Plan of Happiness,” 74.

17. The First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “The Family: A Proclamation to the World,” *Ensign* 25, no. 11 (November 1995): 102.

18. Parke, “Gender Differences and Similarities,” 120–63.

19. Marc H. Bornstein, “Parenting x Gender x Culture x Time,” in Wilcox and Kline, *Gender and Parenthood*, 92.

be “clear gender differences” in the level of parental involvement, taking on of tasks, and style of interaction parents exhibit as they carry out parenting responsibilities.²⁰ The resulting effect is that mothers and fathers influence a wide range of children’s developmental domains but do so through different processes; when these processes are combined, they present complementary patterns that are valuable for children’s development.

These gender differences enable fathers and mothers to influence the same developmental domains through distinct pathways that together benefit children’s development. The developmental wholeness facilitated by the careful, consistent caregiving of both a mother and a father emerges as greater than the sum of the individual parts. Neither the father nor the mother is subordinate to each other. Rather, their intertwining differences reveal a complementarity that is measurably significant in facilitating healthy development.

Bonding Patterns

Let’s consider what social science research reveals about how mothers and fathers shape children’s **social and emotional development**. Every infant is born dependent on specific social and emotional interactions during a very formative period of brain and body development. In order for those interactions to enable healthy growth, they must occur within a relationship that is predictable, consistent, and emotionally available.²¹ In fact, the first essential task for an infant is to establish a bond through which connection and communication can occur. **From the moment** an infant leaves the womb, she is searching, communicating, interacting—primed to sensitively perceive and seek out a particular caregiver, already demonstrating a preference for her mother, seeking her smell, tone of voice, and touch.²²

The mother is also physiologically primed to establish such a bond. Face-to-face, body-to-body, sound-to-sound, right brain-to-right brain, mother and infant communicate. In the process, the mother regulates the emotions of the infant—who has little capacity to regulate them—minimizing negative feelings while maximizing positive

20. Parke, “Gender Differences and Similarities,” 123.

21. Allan N. Schore, *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self: The Neurobiology of Emotional Development* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 3.

22. Schore, *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self*, 373–75.

feelings, soothing and calming, and enhancing excitement and happiness.²³ Remarkably, an estimated one million new synapses are **forming each second**, leading to a literal doubling in brain size during the first year and a half of life.²⁴ And most of it happens within a very specific section of the brain, the right brain, where personality, self-awareness, empathy, capacity for attention, regulation of stress, ability to experience and read emotions, and capacity for intimacy are developed.²⁵ In **neuro-psychologist Allan Schore's words**, quite literally through this exquisitely emotional relationship, "mother nature and mother nurture combine to shape human nature."²⁶

The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development concluded that the way a mother interacts with her child, her *maternal sensitivity*, is not only the most important factor in attachment security but also the strongest, most consistent predictor of her child's cognitive, social, and emotional development.²⁷ This finding was the result of extensive research into the potential effects of daycare on children's development. Even when children spent long hours away from their mothers, her maternal sensitivity was the most consistent predictor of all aspects of their development.

Neuropsychological studies of infant brain development have also been important in demonstrating why the effects of maternal interactions are so long-lasting. Mothers appear to be particularly sensitive

23. Allan N. Schore, "Effects of a Secure Attachment Relationship on Right Brain Development, Affect Regulation, and Infant Mental Health," *Infant Mental Health Journal* 22, nos. 1–2 (2001): 7–66; Allan N. Schore, "Modern Attachment Theory: The Enduring Impact of Early Right-brain Development," October 27, 2016, lecture, Roots of Empathy Research Symposium, 49:06, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cosKY86Qmzo>.

24. "Brain Architecture," Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University, accessed April 5, 2023, <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>.

25. Robert Winston and Rebecca Chicot, "The Importance of Early Bonding on the Long-term Mental Health and Resilience of Children," *London Journal of Primary Care* 8, no. 1 (2016): 12; Allan N. Schore, "The First 1000 Days of Life: A Critical Period for Shaping our Emotional Selves and Social Brains," September 29, 2017, university lecture, UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine, Oslo, Norway, 1:51:54, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IY7XOuoYi-E>.

26. Allan N. Schore, "The Most Important Years of Life: Our Beginnings," September 18, 2014, university lecture, UCLA David Geffen School of Medicine, Oslo, Norway, 1:36:37, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XnyMD_aARvI.

27. National Institute of Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, "Does Amount of Time Spent in Child Care Predict Socioemotional Adjustment during the Transition to Kindergarten?," *Child Development* 74, no. 4 (July–August 2003): 992.

in modifying the stimulation they give to their infants. Through finely tuned perceptions, they match their infants' intellectual and emotional state and provide the optimal level of stimulation needed for the children's developing brains.²⁸ This process affects changes "in the hypothalamic-pituitary axis" with "positive effects on memory, cognitions, stress tolerance, emotional and behavioral regulation, and cardiovascular, metabolic, and immune function."²⁹

It appears that through the emotionally attuned interactions that begin with a mother, a child develops an "internal working model" for understanding and experiencing all other relationships. When the attachment relationship is secure, the infant learns to appropriately interpret and self-reflect about past and future attachment situations and to regulate relationship closeness and conflict resolution.³⁰ A continued secure attachment across development enables the child to develop the capacity to appreciate, understand, and empathize with the feelings of others.³¹ When the attachment is insecure, the infant develops a mistrusting orientation to relationships and is unable to appropriately understand and regulate social behavior. Continued insecurity prevents the child from developing appropriate social regulatory mechanisms.

Early attachment security has been a predictor of children's social interactions, personality development, and behavioral problems, as well as their future attachment behaviors as adults with their own children.³² And although not inherently pathological, an insecure attachment has been identified as an "initiator of pathways probabilistically associated with later pathology."³³ This explains why early socio-emotional experiences have repeatedly been associated with children exhibiting

28. Schore, *Affect Regulation and the Origin of the Self*, 76.

29. Kathleen K. Kline and Brian Stafford, "Essential Elements of the Caretaking Crucible," in Wilcox and Kline, *Gender and Parenthood*, 203.

30. Inge Bretherton and Kristine A. Munholland, "Internal Working Models in Attachment Relationships," in *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*, ed. Jude Cassidy and Phillip R. Shaver, 2nd ed. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2008), 102–27.

31. Ross A. Thompson, "Early Attachment and Later Development," in Cassidy and Shaver, *Handbook of Attachment*, 348–65.

32. L. Alan Sroufe, Elizabeth Carlson, and Shmuel Shulman, "Individuals in Relationships: Development from Infancy through Adolescence," in *Studying Lives through Time: Personality and Development*, ed. David C. Funder and others (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1993), 315–42.

33. L. Alan Sroufe and others, "Implications of Attachment Theory for Developmental Psychopathology," *Development and Psychopathology* 11, no. 1 (1999): 1.

antisocial behaviors across development. Through the attachment process, and its associated maternal sensitivity, children develop the capacity to appreciate, understand, and empathize with the feelings of others. This in turn enables children to develop the moral awareness and responsibility that form the underpinnings of their moral behavior beyond infancy.

The mother is not the only person who can establish this important bond, but both biological and socialized influences appear to prime mothers for this significant bonding process. For example, considerable evidence suggests that the biological changes in hormonal patterns experienced during pregnancy, childbirth, and nursing are related to maternal responsiveness and sensitivity. In addition, though women express all emotions other than anger stronger than men, they are “better able to regulate emotions than men.”³⁴ This “superior ability to manage emotional expression” likely strengthens their nurturing capacity as mothers. Bjorklund and Jordan explain further, “Caring for infants and young children often requires delaying one’s own gratification and the inhibition of aggressive responses, areas in which a female advantage is consistently found.”³⁵

Across all stages of a child’s development, mothers emerge as the preferred “source of comfort in times of stress.”³⁶ Indeed, children’s awareness of and capacity to identify their emotions is often the consequence of maternal labeling during the process of caregiving. For many mothers, the work of helping children identify feelings and openly discuss them is integral to mothers’ efforts to nurture them,³⁷ emerging as a hallmark characteristic in mothers’ interactions with daughters as well as sons.³⁸

But what of fathers? **Neuropsychological research on development** suggests that mother and father are not equal systems; they both form a unique bond with the baby that facilitates development. Mother-infant bonding has shown a greater influence on the emotion-processing structures, while father-infant bonding has shown a greater influence on mental processing networks. Each **bond plays a critical role**, beginning with

34. David F. Bjorklund and Ashley C. Jordan, “Human Parenting from an Evolutionary Perspective,” in Wilcox and Kline, *Gender and Parenthood*, 68.

35. Bjorklund and Jordan, “Human Parenting from an Evolutionary Perspective,” 68.

36. Parke, “Gender Differences and Similarities,” 123.

37. Rebecca J. Erickson, “Why Emotion Work Matters: Sex, Gender, and the Division of Household Labor,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67, no. 2 (May 2005): 337–51.

38. Susanne A. Denham and others, “Prediction of Externalizing Behavior Problems from Early to Middle Childhood: The Role of Parental Socialization and Emotion Expression,” *Development and Psychopathology* 12, no. 1 (2000): 40.

the mother and infant during the earliest period of development, with the father taking a stronger role in toddlerhood.³⁹

While caring for infants, both mothers and fathers experience a flood of the bonding hormone oxytocin,⁴⁰ but the same hormone elicits different, even complementary, behaviors. Mothers tend to engage by expressing positive feelings, affectionately touching and gazing at their infants, and engaging in “motherese” vocalizations. For fathers, oxytocin is associated with “stimulatory” and playful behaviors rather than security-inducing behaviors.⁴¹ Thus, while mothers are more likely to be “cooing and cuddling” their infants, fathers are more likely to be “tickling and tossing.”⁴² These differences foreshadow more complementary parenting patterns exhibited across children’s development.

Identity and Social Capacity

Given the profound influence of a mother’s distinct psychological orientation, strengths, and style of interaction, it may appear that mothers are more important in the socio-emotional lives of their children than fathers. The reality that mothers develop new life from their own bodies then give birth to infants who continue to be very dependent on them for survival has meant that “in almost all species and regions of the world, across a wide diversity of subsistence activities and social ideologies, observational studies indicate more maternal than paternal investment.”⁴³ In summarizing why, Bjorklund and Jordan explain, “In mammals, conception and gestation occur within the female body, and she must invest the time associated with pregnancy as well as that required by postpartum suckling.”⁴⁴ This resulting difference in “obligatory investment in offspring” has meant “different psychologies” with respect to how and how much men and women devote themselves to parenting.⁴⁵ Mothers tend, for example, to spontaneously engage their

39. Schore, “First 1000 Days of Life.”

40. Anne E. Storey and others, “Hormonal Correlates of Paternal Responsiveness in New and Expectant Fathers,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 21, no. 2 (2000): 79–95.

41. Ilanit Gordon and others, “Oxytocin and the Development of Parenting in Humans,” *Biological Psychiatry* 68, no. 4 (2010): 377–82.

42. Lisa Belkin, “Why Mothers and Fathers Play Differently,” *New York Times*, September 2, 2010, <https://archive.nytimes.com/parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/09/02/why-mothers-and-fathers-play-differently/>.

43. Bornstein, “Parenting x Gender x Culture x Time,” 100.

44. Bjorklund and Jordan, “Human Parenting from an Evolutionary Perspective,” 66.

45. Bjorklund and Jordan, “Human Parenting from an Evolutionary Perspective,” 67.

children more frequently than their husbands and provide routine care much more frequently.⁴⁶ That difference in greater contact time with children for mothers tends to persist in all cultures across all stages of development. Thus, Bjorklund and Jordan conclude, “it goes without saying that mothers have a major influence on their children” regardless of whether they are the primary caregiver.⁴⁷

But this is perhaps where recent research has been most enlightening. Fathering scholar David Eggebeen explains,

Literally, hundreds of studies over the past two decades have consistently demonstrated that fathers have a measurable impact on children. . . . Good studies have found that the quality of parenting exhibited by the father as well as the resources they bring to their family predict children’s behavior problems, depression, self-esteem, and life-satisfaction. The reach of fathers has been shown to extend to adolescents and young adults, as research finds that adolescents function best when their fathers are engaged and involved in their lives. Additional [research] demonstrates that fathers play an important role in helping their children make the transition to adulthood. In short, a fairly extensive body of empirical research has established the importance of fathers throughout the life course of children.⁴⁸

David Popenoe, a noted sociologist and pioneer in fatherhood research, clarifies the distinctive nature of a father’s influence: “Fathers are far more than just ‘second adults’ in the home. Involved fathers . . . bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring.”⁴⁹ This includes benefits in the area of social-emotional development. A father’s closeness to and engagement in the life and activities of his children has predicted positive child outcomes in every area of social-emotional behavior.⁵⁰ This influence is exhibited through his affection, responsiveness, encouragement, instruction, and everyday assistance, as well as his involvement in rule formulation, discipline, monitoring, and supervision. In both nurturing- and guidance-oriented

46. Jay Belsky, Bonnie Gilstrap, and Michael Rovine, “The Pennsylvania Infant and Family Development Project: I. Stability and Change in Mother-Infant and Father-Infant Interaction in a Family Setting at One, Three, and Nine Months,” *Child Development* 55, no. 3 (June 1984): 692–705.

47. Bjorklund and Jordan, “Human Parenting from an Evolutionary Perspective,” 71.

48. David J. Eggebeen, “Do Fathers Matter for Adolescent Well-Being?,” in Wilcox and Kline, *Gender and Parenthood*, 249.

49. David Popenoe, *Life without Father: Compelling New Evidence That Fatherhood and Marriage Are Indispensable for the Good of Children and Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 163.

50. Parke, “Gender Differences and Similarities,” 131–33.

behaviors, fathers influence children's outcomes even when mothers' influence is taken into account.

Mothers' nurturing appears to be oriented toward the development of a secure identity and emotional understanding, while fathers' nurturing appears to be oriented toward the development of social and relational capacity. This complementarity is reflected in the way mothers and fathers hold their infants. While a mother is likely to hold her infant to enable maximum contact with her face and body, a father is most likely to hold the infant in a way that gives the baby the same view of the world as the father has. This "football hold" orients the infant's face outward, toward others.⁵¹

Interestingly, fathers' involvement with their children is consistently a predictor of how children relate to others. Father closeness during a child's adolescence has been identified as a predictor of empathy and marital relationship quality in adulthood.⁵² In contrast, lack of father involvement has repeatedly been associated with delinquent and criminal behaviors that continue into adulthood.⁵³ For boys, the mere presence of a father in the home predicts less delinquent behavior.⁵⁴

Some of this may be due in part to the **discipline style of fathers**. Fathers tend to discipline less often than mothers, but when they do, they exhibit more firmness and predictability. Children, in turn, are more likely to comply with their father's requests and demands than with their mother's. Parenting scholars Kyle and Marsha Kline Pruett note, "Fathers tend to be more willing than mothers to confront their children and enforce discipline, leaving their children with the impression that they in fact *have* more authority."⁵⁵ In contrast, mothers tend to draw on their emotional connections to their children as the source of their authority, using more reasoning and flexibility in carrying out discipline. While this combination provides children a complementary, balanced approach to discipline, it may also illuminate why fathers' involvement is more strongly related to delinquent behavior.

51. See Kyle Pruett and Marsha Kline Pruett, *Partnership Parenting: How Men and Women Parent Differently—Why It Helps Your Kids and Can Strengthen Your Marriage* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Books, 2009), 23–58.

52. Richard Koestner, Carol Franz, and Joel Weinberger, "The Family Origins of Empathic Concern: A 26-Year Longitudinal Study," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 58, no. 4 (1990): 709–17.

53. Paul R. Amato and Fernando Rivera, "Paternal Involvement and Children's Behavior Problems," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 61, no. 2 (May 1999): 375–84.

54. Deborah A. Cobb-Clark and Erdal Tekin, "Fathers and Youth's Delinquent Behavior," *Review of Economics of the Household* 12, no. 2 (2011): 327–58.

55. Pruett and Pruett, *Partnership Parenting*, 162–63.

Fathers also influence children's social and relational capacity through their unique form of play. Compared to mothers, fathers are much more likely to interact through physical and verbal play.⁵⁶ And that play is predictive of the quality of children's peer relationships. In repeated studies, fathers who spent more time in positive play with their children had children with the highest peer ratings. When fathers were more responsive, patient, playful, and less coercive in their play, children showed less aggressiveness and more peer competence, and they were better liked.⁵⁷

As one report noted, "rough-housing with dad" appears to "teach children how to deal with aggressive impulses and physical contact without losing control of their emotions."⁵⁸ Through play, fathers help children learn how to temper and channel emotions in a positive, interactive way and gain confidence in their ability to do so. As children age, fathers focus less on physical play and engage in more peer-like verbal play in the form of sarcasm and humor.⁵⁹ Peer-like verbal play allows a father to tease and joke with a child within the safety of the father-child relationship, thus strengthening children's sense of identity and social confidence. In some ways it appears that mothers' nurturing tends to build self-understanding while fathers' nurturing tends to strengthen social-relational capacity.

Learning and Achievement

Complementarity is also exhibited in mothers' and fathers' influence on children's mental development and educational achievement. The emotional sensitivity mothers provide in early infancy emerges as foundational to cognitive capacities. In speaking of this finely tuned process, three psychiatrists from the University of California at Berkeley concluded, "Whether they realize it or not, mothers use the universal signs of emotion to teach their babies about the world. . . . Emotionality gives the two of them a common language years before the infant will acquire speech. . . . It isn't just his mother's beaming countenance but her

56. Parke, "Gender Differences and Similarities," 128–29.

57. Craig H. Hart and others, "Overt and Relational Aggression in Russian Nursery-School-Age Children: Parenting Style and Marital Linkages," *Developmental Psychology* 34, no. 4 (1998): 687–97.

58. Jeffrey Rosenberg and W. Bradford Wilcox, *The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children* (Washington, D.C.: Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 2006), 13.

59. Parke, "Gender Differences and Similarities," 128.

synchrony that he requires—their mutually responsive interaction.”⁶⁰ The relatively simple yet profound process of “mutually responsive interaction” shows how mothers influence a whole host of cognitive capacities, including IQ development, shared attention, referential communication, social learning, language, autobiographical memory, and theory of mind, among others.⁶¹

Recent findings have clarified the intricately bound processes of mother-child emotional connection and intellectual stimulation. After years of research findings showing a correlation between breastfeeding and brain development, more sophisticated research methods revealed that the correlation was due to the fact that mothers who breastfeed are also more likely to engage in behaviors that enhance brain development.⁶² The observed behaviors included attention to emotional cues and consistent exposure to language through reading. The benefits of reading to a child were experienced as mothers were attentive to emotional cues from their children in the process of reading to them. This confirmed other research on attachment demonstrating that emotional attentiveness is the critical foundation for cognitive development. And that is most often best facilitated through maternally sensitive interactions between a mother and child.

The interrelationship of emotional attentiveness and cognitive stimulation may also help explain why mothers tend to engage in more teaching-oriented, didactic interactions with children than fathers.⁶³ For example, while mothers might hold up a ball, describe it, and demonstrate what it does, fathers may take the ball and bounce it somewhere on the child’s body, using it in an innovative way. A mother’s verbally rich teaching has important implications for cognitive development, including memory, problem-solving, and language advancement.⁶⁴ But fathers take the foundational contributions mothers make to children’s cognitive development and build upon them.

60. Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 61–62, emphasis original.

61. See Bjorklund and Jordan, “Human Parenting from an Evolutionary Perspective,” 61–90.

62. Benjamin G. Gibbs and Renata Forste, “Breastfeeding, Parenting, and Early Cognitive Development,” *Journal of Pediatrics* 164, no. 3 (2014): 487–93.

63. Parke, “Gender Differences and Similarities,” 133.

64. Laura Hubbs-Tait and others, “Relation of Maternal Cognitive Stimulation, Emotional Support, and Intrusive Behavior during Head Start to Children’s Kindergarten Cognitive Abilities” *Child Development* 73, no. 1 (January–February 2002): 110–31.

When fathers are “involved, nurturing, and playful,” children exhibit higher IQs, language development, and cognitive skills.⁶⁵ One explanation for this is that children with involved fathers show a social-emotional readiness for learning, such as being better able to handle the stresses and frustrations associated with schooling. Fathers also tend to uniquely influence children’s expressive language development by engaging children in more challenging conversational patterns. Research suggests that mothers provide more linguistic input than fathers, and in some cases more complex input. But fathers’ challenging communicative style plays an important role in children’s vocabulary development beyond mothers’ input.⁶⁶

Fathers also appear to play an important role in academic achievement. An involved father has been identified as the strongest predictor of college graduation.⁶⁷ Children with involved fathers were 42 percent more likely to earn “A” grades, 33 percent less likely to repeat a grade, and 98 percent more likely to graduate from college. In part, this is because involved fathers are likely to help with homework and provide financial support for college, but involved fathers also monitor and guide children’s actions, helping them avoid behaviors that might negatively impact school achievement. Indeed, they seem to be able to **foster a learning environment** with just the right mix of “engagement, affection, and supervision.”⁶⁸

Most significantly, fathers appear to build children’s learning capacities in the way they orient children toward learning. Compared to mothers, fathers’ interactions tend to be characterized by arousal, excitement, and unpredictability in a way that stimulates openness to the world and an eagerness to explore and discover.⁶⁹

65. Rosenberg and Wilcox, *Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children*, 12.

66. Kathryn A. Leech and others, “Father Input and Child Vocabulary Development: The Importance of *Wh* Questions and Clarification Requests,” *Seminars in Speech and Language* 34, no 4, (November 2013): 249–59.

67. W. Bradford Wilcox, “Dad and the Diploma: The Difference Fathers Make for College Graduation,” April 23, 2014, Institute for Family Studies, accessed March 22, 2023, <http://family-studies.org/dad-and-the-diploma-the-difference-fathers-make-for-college-graduation/>.

68. Wilcox, “Dad and the Diploma.”

69. Rob Palkovitz, “Gendered Parenting’s Implications for Children’s Well-being: Theory and Research in Applied Perspective,” in Wilcox and Kline, *Gender and Parenthood*, 226.

Fathers also seem to be more strongly oriented toward developing children's independence. Andrea Doucet's extensive observations of and interviews with fathers revealed how fathers tend to focus on children learning to do things independently and find solutions to their own problems.⁷⁰ At lunchtime, for example, stay-at-home dads were more likely to say, "Make your own sandwich," while mothers were more likely to make them. Similarly, fathers were more likely to tell children to "get your own backpack on" or "tie your own shoes," while mothers were more likely to step in and assist them. Initially, Doucet wondered if fathers just weren't as nurturing as mothers. Fathers' behaviors did not seem to fit the traditional definition of "holding close and sensitively responding." But further analysis revealed how this seeming "indifference" was a strategic form of nurturing. A key part of nurturing also includes the capacity to "let go." It was this careful "letting go" that fathers appeared to be particularly good at.

Daniel Paquette found from his research that fathers also "tend to encourage children to take risks, while at the same time ensuring safety and security," which facilitates children's development of independence, confidence, and standing up for themselves in unfamiliar situations.⁷¹ This comprehensive, facilitative approach to independence seems to translate into fathers' influence on educational success.⁷²

Fathers also tend to be more "cognitively demanding" of their children by pushing them to demonstrate their skills and knowledge without help, while mothers tend toward a scaffolding approach, by reaching in and helping.⁷³ For example, sitting behind a child who is trying to solve a problem, mothers tend to intervene and help them when they can't figure it out. Fathers, on the other hand, tend to hold back while encouraging them that they can do it on their own. Acknowledging this complementary pattern, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report concludes, "Fathers often push achievement while mothers stress nurturing, both of which are important to healthy development. As a

70. Doucet, *Do Men Mother?*, 117.

71. Daniel Paquette, "Theorizing the Father-Child Relationship: Mechanisms and Developmental Outcomes," *Human Development* 47, no. 4 (2004), 193-219.

72. W. Bradford Wilcox and Robin Fretwell Wilson, "One Way to End Violence against Women? Married Dads," *Washington Post*, June 10, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2014/06/10/the-best-way-to-end-violence-against-women-stop-taking-lovers-and-get-married/>.

73. Palkovitz, "Gendered Parenting's Implications for Children's Well-being," 220.

result, children who grow up with involved fathers are more comfortable exploring the world around them and more likely to exhibit self-control and pro-social behavior.”⁷⁴

Gender Identity and Sexual Development

While evidence clearly suggests that fathers and mothers each shape children’s social-emotional and mental development in different ways, evidence also suggests that the mere presence of gender differences is itself important to development—particularly in specific psychological capacities and sexual development.

Henry Biller’s extensive work on fathering and infant development led him to conclude that differences between the mother and father “can be very stimulating” to children, “even those that . . . appear quite superficial,” and even if the father and mother “behave in generally similar ways.” Their presence presents contrasting images and experiences—a father is usually larger than a mother, has a deeper voice, wears different clothes, moves and reacts differently, and communicates in a different verbal style to children as well as adults. The infant also learns that mothers and fathers “can be expected to fulfill different needs”: findings indicate that infants may prefer the mother “when hungry or tired” and prefer the father “when seeking stimulation of more active play.”⁷⁵

Fathering scholar Rob Palkovitz draws on findings from researchers in France (as well as developmental scholar Danielle Paquette) in explaining that even though less differentiated parenting appears to be “more socially desirable” today, there is considerable evidence that “the family structure that is most favorable to the socioaffective development of young children” is one in which parents reflect the “different styles, voices, histories, and connections” of distinct maternal and paternal patterns.⁷⁶

Children benefit from “discrimination learning in the positive sense, the formulation of and analyses of differences,” as they experience the psychological and physical differences between their two parents. Thus, Palkovitz concludes, “Experiencing parental differences affords children the opportunity to develop nuanced understandings of individual

74. Rosenberg and Wilcox, *Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children*, 13.

75. Henry B. Biller, *Fathers and Families: Paternal Factors in Child Development* (Boston, Mass.: Auburn House, 1993), 12.

76. Palkovitz, “Gendered Parenting’s Implications for Children’s Well-being,” 223.

differences in personality as well as gender, enhancing social cognition . . . [and] advanced cognitive functioning.”⁷⁷

Experiencing parental gender differences is also argued to be core to children’s gender identity development. In 2003, a distinguished group of thirty-three neuroscientists, pediatricians, and social scientists comprising the Commission on Children at Risk reviewed research exploring gender development of children. Their report confirmed that typically at about eighteen to twenty-four months a child “begins to show a deep need to understand and make sense of her or his sexual embodiment.”⁷⁸ An individual’s need to “attach social significance and meaning” to his or her own gender “appears to be a human universal.” Indeed, the report concludes, “Gender also runs deeper, near to the core of human identity and social meaning—in part because it is biologically primed and connected to differences in brain structure and function and because it is so deeply implicated in the transition to adulthood.”⁷⁹

In the need to attach significance to his or her gender, and make sense of his or her own identity, a “child’s relationships with mother and father become centrally important,” and “both the same-sex-as-me parent and the opposite-sex-from-me-parent play vital roles.”⁸⁰ Psychologists have long understood that human beings come to understand their identity through experiencing themselves in relation to others. The experience of both a parent who is opposite sex and a parent who is of the same sex thus plays an important role in facilitating a child’s ability to understand his or her own gender identity.

This hunger for experience and closeness with both a mother and father also emerges in explorations of how children relate to others sexually. Bruce Ellis’s foundational work identifying the consistent link between daughters’ sexual development and fathers found that daughters who were close emotionally and physically to their fathers had a reduced risk of early puberty and early initiation of sex.⁸¹ The effect is so consistent that scholars have concluded that an absent father is “the

77. Palkovitz, “Gendered Parenting’s Implications for Children’s Well-being,” 223, 229.

78. Commission on Children at Risk, “Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities,” in *Authoritative Communities*, The Search Institute Series on Developmentally Attentive Community and Society, vol. 5 (New York: Springer, 2008), 17.

79. Commission on Children at Risk, “Hardwired to Connect,” 18.

80. Commission on Children at Risk, “Hardwired to Connect,” 17.

81. Bruce J. Ellis and others, “Does Father Absence Place Daughters at Special Risk for Early Sexual Activity and Teenage Pregnancy?,” *Child Development* 74, no. 3, (May–June 2003): 801–21.

single greatest risk factor in teen pregnancy for girls.”⁸² Indeed, the presence and emotional closeness of fathers seems to “‘set’ the reproductive strategy” girls use throughout their lives.⁸³ In offering some explanation for these findings, fathering scholar Bradford Wilcox concludes, “Girls raised in homes with their fathers are more likely to receive the attention, affection, and modeling that they need from their own fathers to rebuff teenage boys and young men who do not have their best interests at heart.”⁸⁴

But it is not only daughters’ sexual relationships that are affected by closeness to their fathers. When boys do not experience the closeness and modeling of their fathers, they appear to be more likely to engage in what David Popenoe calls “protest masculinity,” exhibited in rejecting and denigrating anything feminine while seeking to prove masculinity through aggressive and sexual domination.⁸⁵ In contrast, “boys who are raised in homes with their fathers are more likely to acquire the sense of self-worth and self-control that allows them to steer clear of delinquent peers and trouble with the law,” including in their sexual behaviors.⁸⁶

Self-control and self-worth become defining characteristics of boys’ masculine identity, manifesting themselves in behavioral patterns as well as achievements. Given that paternal influence, Bruce Ellis hypothesized that fathers’ involvement may enhance a boy’s competitive urge, “spurring sons to achieve more when they grow up and leave the family.”⁸⁷ This hypothesis is underscored by increasing evidence of a gender gap in educational achievement, which appears to be related to boys not growing up with their fathers.⁸⁸

82. Palkovitz, “Gendered Parenting’s Implications for Children’s Well-being,” 227.

83. Raeburn, *Do Fathers Matter?*, 162.

84. W. Bradford Wilcox, “Father’s Day: Are Dads Really Disposable?,” *Deseret News*, June 14, 2012, <https://www.deseret.com/2012/6/14/20503429/father-s-day-are-dads-really-disposable>.

85. Popenoe, *Life without Father*, 156–57.

86. Wilcox, “Father’s Day.”

87. Raeburn, *Do Fathers Matter?*, 166.

88. David Autor and others, “Family Disadvantage and the Gender Gap in Behavioral and Educational Outcomes,” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 11, no. 3 (July 2019): 338–81; W. Bradford Wilcox and Wendy Wang, “Life without Fathers: Less College, Less Work, and More Prison for Young Men Growing Up without Their Biological Father,” *Institute for Family Studies*, June 17, 2022, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/life-without-father-less-college-less-work-and-more-prison-for-young-men-growing-up-without-their-biological-father>; Wilcox, “Father’s Day.”

Safety and Survival

From the moment of her child's birth, a mother faces the realization that a fragile life depends on her.⁸⁹ The physical connection inherent in the biological relationship between mother and child seems to make mothers particularly sensitive to responsibility for the child's protection and well-being.⁹⁰ Her fear for the baby's survival and growth may also make her vigilant and attentive to finding the best food, care, and medical help, and avoiding possible dangers. These natural attunements serve an important constructive and protective function for a child. Studies consistently indicate that mothers have a significant role in influencing their children's health and well-being throughout their development.

Across cultures mothers are a central influence in providing the nourishment needed for early survival, but in a remarkably complementary way, fathers emerge as important protectors from danger. Noting a substantial body of research, Bradford Wilcox summarized, "Fathers play an important role in ensuring the safety of their children, both by monitoring their children's activities and peers, and by signaling to others, from neighborhood bullies to adults seeking a target for abuse, that they will not tolerate harm to their children. Indeed, by simply sticking around, ordinary dads play an important role in protecting their children from physical, sexual, and emotional abuse."⁹¹

The Fourth National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect Report to Congress found that children raised by their married mothers and fathers were the least likely to experience abuse.⁹² Children living with their single mother and unrelated boyfriend were ten times more likely to be abused when compared to children living with their married mother and father. These findings are consistent with the National Survey of Children's Health reporting on the percentage of children who experience adverse childhood events (ACEs).⁹³ ACEs have become

89. See Daniel N. Stern and Nadia Bruschweiler-Stern with Alison Freeland, *The Birth of a Mother: How the Motherhood Experience Changes You Forever* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).

90. Doucet, *Do Men Mother?*, 109–10.

91. Wilcox, "Father's Day."

92. "National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4)," *Administration for Children and Families*, accessed September 24, 2022, <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/research/project/national-incidence-study-of-child-abuse-and-neglect-nis-4-2004-2009>.

93. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, "Children in Nonparental Care: Findings from the 2011–2012 National Survey of Children's Health,"

increasingly important to identify because they represent traumatic experiences that can have negative, lasting effects on health and well-being across development. Children living in families with their married biological parents were overwhelmingly safer than children living with just one biological parent, or with nonparental caregivers. While 70 percent of children living with both biological parents never experienced an adverse childhood event, 78 percent of those living with just one biological parent had experienced at least one of them.⁹⁴ It is likely a combination of factors that explains why fathers emerge as such important protectors of their children. As discussed above, fathers are more likely to be involved and attentive to their children than step-fathers or unrelated boyfriends. Their day-to-day presence in the home means that unrelated males are less likely to interact with children for sustained periods. It also means that children are more likely to receive the level of support and connection that makes them less vulnerable to potential predators. Children being raised in a home with their married fathers are also more likely to live in safer areas and spend less time in dangerous areas with potentially dangerous predators. Whatever the combination of factors, research findings repeatedly indicate that a distinct and important contribution of fathers is the safety and protection they provide for their children.

Conclusion

It is clear from the research discussed here that there is much overlap in the capacities, skills, and behaviors of mothers and fathers that enable children to develop and even thrive. But as this article demonstrates, mothers and fathers exhibit different capacities, styles, and psychological orientations that emerge as important, and sometimes critical, contributors in children's social-emotional, mental, and sexual development as well as their safety and protection.

In each of these developmental areas, a surprisingly precise complementarity between mothers' and fathers' parenting strengths tends to emerge. Whereas mothers are biologically prepared to nurture, teach, and provide care that is especially important for foundational development, fathers tend to take a facilitative approach to parenting, fostering

February, 28, 2014, ASPE Research Brief, accessed March 22, 2023, http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/14/ChildrenNonparentalCare/rb_nonparentalcare.pdf.

94. Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, "Children in Nonparental Care."

self-reliance, achievement, and healthy peer relationships in ways that are particularly important especially as children begin to transition to adult life. Indeed, evidence of these distinct contributions confirms a long-assumed proposition—namely, that the direct, continual, loving involvement of both a mother and a father in the home is ideal for the child’s development.

While this evidence cannot be assumed to describe eternal verities about the nature of our eternal gender, it does offer a valuable lens through which to understand the restored doctrine that there is something significant about the dual nature of our divinity. In terms of children’s development, a substantial body of evidence indicates how mothers and fathers engage with their children using distinctive temperaments and capacities, contributing “differently but equally to a oneness and unity” that appears to be achievable in no other way. In many ways, it appears that her motherhood “completes and perfects” his fatherhood, even as his fatherhood “completes and perfects” her motherhood in ways that “mutually strengthen and bless each other” and their children.⁹⁵

The complementarity that is bound up in their equality is beautifully captured in Elder Bruce C. and Sister Marie K. Hafen’s description: “In the . . . family, each spouse freely gives something the other does not have and without which neither can be complete and return to God’s presence. Spouses are not a soloist with an accompanist, nor are they two solos. They are the interdependent parts of a duet, singing together in harmony at a level where no solo can go.”⁹⁶

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95. Bednar, “Marriage Is Essential to His Eternal Plan,” 84.

96. Bruce C. Hafen and Marie K. Hafen, “Crossing Thresholds and Becoming Equal Partners,” *Liahona* 31, no. 8 (August 2007): 30.