

Mother Nurture

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Empathy for a Father

Before we had kids, I felt like my husband and I really understood each other, but now it's almost like we live on separate continents . . .

With good reason, many mothers say they wish their partner sympathized more with their situation. But the other side of the coin is also often true: that a father wishes his partner understood HIM more. Since one of the best ways to receive more understanding and consideration is to give it – and since most of our columns focus on addressing the needs of mothers – let's take a moment to explore empathy for a father.

For simplicity, we'll write as if we were addressing a mother, but a dad can certainly read this piece and see what parts fit for him. We'll draw on Rick's experience as a dad and our conversations with fathers to suggest how it may be for your partner to be a parent; this is a composite, a generalization, of a father that will not fit the partner of any woman in every way.

- *Now I'm a dad* -- As profoundly as you, he loves the child you have made together. He has many of the same feelings you do, like happiness when the baby first curls her tiny fingers around one of his own.

Yet since he probably spends less time with children than you, it is quite possible that he feels less sure of his skills. Feeling awkward or inept is uncomfortable for many men and makes it hard to ask for help.

Maybe he's asked you what he could do and been told he should already know. Maybe he's tried to dive in and help and then been told it's all wrong. He picks up your underlying attitude about his parenting skills, and the way many mothers talk to each other about their partners is quite disdainful. He may experience you squeezing him out of the parent role while complaining that he's not involved enough.

- *Tugged in different directions* -- He shows his love for his children and you in part by stepping up his efforts as a provider. Yet that tends to draw him into working longer hours when you wish he'd put more energy into your children and home. Unfortunately, his workplace almost certainly couldn't care less about the needs of his family, so he's stuck between a rock and a hard place.

He's probably more engaged in child rearing and housework than his own father was. Nonetheless, if you are like most mothers, you'd still like more involvement and help, so he feels uneasy and resentful that he is not coming up to the standard of what you want in a partner.

- *Married to a mother* -- He is awed at your ability to make a baby and deeply grateful that you have enabled him to have a child. He probably appreciates your sacrifices more than he has been able to say.

He's also worried by any fatigue, depression, or other health problems that have developed since you became a mother. But when he offers well-meaning suggestions, like you getting more exercise or using more child care, there's a fair chance you get irritated, because you want empathy rather than problem solving, think his idea is impractical, or feel he's trying to make you give less to your kids. After a few rounds of this, maybe he stops trying to help you.

- *Where did my wife go?* -- He loves his child incredibly, but his relationship with you is still a priority in itself, not merely as a framework for raising children.

He feels keenly the loss of the attention, energy, affection, and love you have shifted from him to your child. It can easily seem to him that you regard him as little more than a means to your ends. One father said: ***I go out in the world like a caveman who brings home the meat. I drop it at her feet, she says "thanks" and goes back to our daughter. It's like I'm not in the room.*** And this shift in a mother's attention away from her partner is made painfully concrete by the disinterest many have in sex.

- *Does my wife understand me?* -- You cannot make your husband understand you, but you can try to understand him: that much is in your power. You could ask him about the description of a father just above. Or you could simply observe him for a while without any assumptions, wondering how it feels to be him deep down inside.

Since you give understanding to your children all day long, you might have "empathy fatigue." So it may take a conscious decision to bring understanding to your husband. But if you do, he will notice your interest and appreciate it and be more empathic with you as well. And when the two of you have a better idea of the feelings and wants of each other, you will be more able to solve problems together.

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