



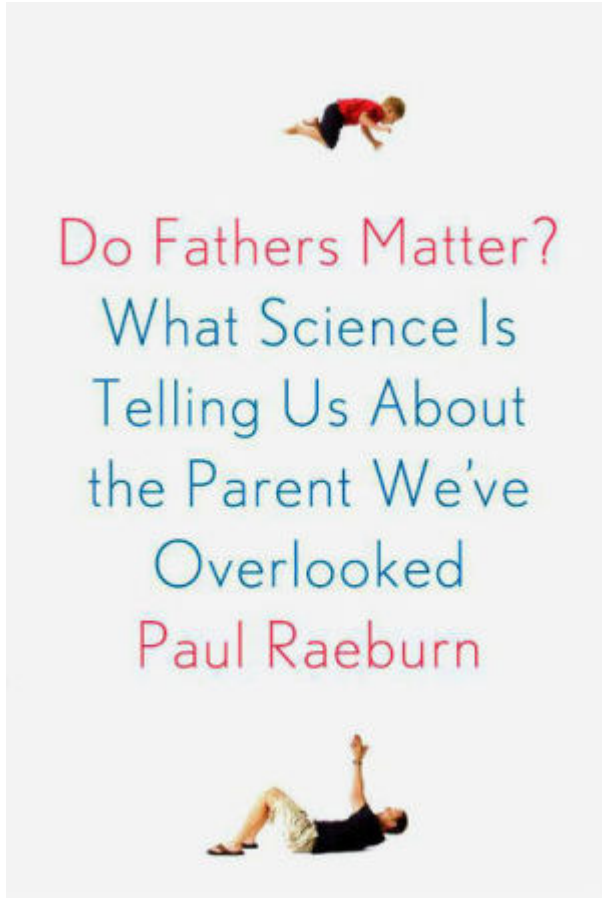
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DAILY NEWS

'Fathers' a well-developed book

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"Do Fathers Matter? What Science Is Telling Us About the Parent We've Overlooked" by Paul Raeburn. New York, N.Y.: Scientific American/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014. 272 pages, \$26.



"Psychologists and other social scientists, who should have been leading the charge to change prevailing views of fatherhood, instead contributed to the devaluation of fathers," Paul Raeburn observes in "Do Fathers Matter? What Science Is Telling Us About the Parent We've Overlooked," his new, best-selling treatise on why the role of fathers is often overlooked in contemporary society.

"Many researchers believed that because mothers were the primary caretakers, they were far more important than fathers. That prevailing view put fathers in a tough spot. Fathers could hardly assert their importance when they were repeatedly being told they were irrelevant, except as the providers of the family income."

I readily admit my initial motivation for reading this book was self-serving. As I have grown older, reflecting on my upbringing has become a favorite pastime. Episodes from my childhood have taken on entirely new meaning as I continually reevaluate the role my parents played in helping me to become the person I am today; I suspect I am not alone in this quest.

Part of what it means to be human is the longing to make sense of our own existence. Why do we think the way we do? Why do we feel the way we do? Why do we act the way we do? Obviously, the answers to these very personal yet universal questions can be found, at least in part, in the relationship we had with our parents, or whoever assumed that role, during our formative years.

Raeburn is a naturally inquisitive writer. His last book, "Acquainted with the Night: A Parent's Quest to Understand Depression and Bipolar Disorder in His Children," was a highly subjective account of his struggle to understand and support his children's depression and bipolar disorder at the same time his marriage was falling apart. A sense of guilt permeated that volume in the sense that he and his ex-wife were constantly beset with the suspicion their own relationship problems could have inadvertently contributed to the challenges faced by their kids. The current effort has that same aura; his struggle to define the appropriate role he should play in his children's lives is obviously one of the driving forces behind "Do Fathers Matter?"

It is important to acknowledge that Raeburn is not writing yet another self-help book on how to be a better father. Although he sometimes delves into the philosophical realm in his discussion of cultural influences and expectations, he generally adheres strictly to science as the basis for his inquiries, interpretations, conclusions and implications.

“Fathers in the Lab,” one of my favorite chapters, deals almost exclusively with a series of experiments involving paternal behavior among mice. Although the average reader is probably aware that mice are used in various kinds of medical research, their use to investigate parenting behavior is perhaps less familiar. But, as illustrated in the following passage, their utility on this front is undeniable:

“The research with the fathers showed much the same thing. Not only were the California mouse fathers behaving like the mothers, they were also experiencing the same kinds of changes in the brain. The control mice who weren’t fathers and hadn’t been exposed to pups didn’t show the same brain changes. The good dads had reduced neural activity in parts of the brain associated with stress, and increased activity in a couple of brain hormones – vasopressin and oxytocin. Just being around pups, in other words, was enough to make a male’s brain partially resemble the brains of the good biological dads.”

That Raeburn sees the role of the father as critical to healthy development is obvious on virtually every page of the book. But beyond the microcosmic level of the individual family, the author is also concerned about the macrocosmic level of society in general. Witness the inevitable conclusion he reaches after surveying all the available social, psychological and economic evidence in “What Fathers Do,” the final chapter of the book:

“When we put all this together, we can make a strong case that the absence of a father in a family can have devastating consequences for children. Multiple studies suggest that fatherlessness is a major contributor to crime and juvenile delinquency; premature sexuality and out-of-wedlock births to teenagers; deteriorating educational achievement; depression, substance abuse, and alienation among adolescents; and the growing number of women and children in poverty.”

For the record, Raeburn is the chief media critic for the Knight Science Journalism Tracer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is a past president of the National Association of Science Writers and has had articles published in *Psychology Today*, *Business Week*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Discover*, *The Huffington Post* and *Scientific American*.

In addition to “Acquainted with the Night,” his previous books also include “Mars: Uncovering the Secrets of the Red Planet” and “The Last Harvest: The Genetic Gamble That Threatens to Destroy American Agriculture.” As is characteristic of all his work, “Do Fathers Matter?” is extensively researched with 18 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction, nine chapters and afterword that form the main narrative. His literary style is concise yet comprehensive.

I recommend “Do Fathers Matter?” to anyone who has ever wondered if indeed fathers are as important as mothers when it comes to setting the stage for success later in life. My prediction is you will be able to relate to Raeburn’s well-developed and wonderfully executed book in a way that will change the way you feel about both of your parents. You can never fully escape your childhood – this book will help you to understand why.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*