

**Fatherhood. Barcelona
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**The father/ son relationship:
experiences, affection, and
sensitivities**

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- The distribution of love between parents and children is regulated by major society-driven differences. These differences stem from biology –it is not the same to be a mother or to be a father. Furthermore, these differences are also associated to an indisputable truth in the general opinion but subject to debate in the scientific community: the instincts. It is difficult to challenge a deeply-entrenched idea such as the maternal instinct, which creates a biological bond between mother and child and leaves no room for the father.

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- The assumption that biology and nature are the only source that can create affective bonds with children – and therefore exclusive to the mother and exclusionary for the father– is currently under fire. Culture, presence, closeness, and care can also generate an equally strong bond of union and love, which has implications for the father/child relationship.

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- We are at a crossroads where traditions, cultural models, scientific theories and new behavior codes meet and sometimes clash. While science does not quite explain to what extent relationships have a natural basis that can predict a specific behavior with children, it is evident that culture has a major impact on that behavior.

- There are also evidences –as our research confirms– that the new fathers are in the process of shifting attitudes and behaviors, and redefining their feelings towards their offspring from the moment their first child is born.

- Some Northern European authors are already talking about the “fatherhood revolution.” These authors stress that men have had a deficient education, one where the concept of “care” is absent from the teenage years, historically transferred to women. Habits and traditions have combined to foster in men a distance from the role of carers, including care of their own children. There are however signs that young fathers are becoming more sensitive, affectionate, and are abandoning a model of behavior driven by sexism.

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- A French magazine conducted in 2003 a large survey about the instinctive tendencies among men towards fatherhood. 70% of those surveyed said they believed in the existence of a paternal instinct. One of the respondents stated that "the feeling of having a baby who needs my care, and the feeling of love that has inspired in me is something I didn't know before, and I'm enjoying day after day."

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- The new fathers in our research prove that both caring for the home and raising children are part of their responsibilities: love and care are not exclusive skills of women.

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- The social image of the new fathers is becoming more and more visible. It is no longer surprising to see fathers pushing babies' prams, and ads show fathers changing diapers. A decade ago, at least in this country, this was unthinkable.

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- For the average Spanish man, having a child is a major decision in terms of the changes in their lifestyle it involves. From a personal perspective, having a child causes a discontinuity, a change in one's personal life. From a more general perspective, it is a stage over and beyond what can be expected in the normal evolution of the society. For this reason, our research differentiates between "being a father" and "having a son" –it is not the same. Being a father is the social outcome of having a child, whereas having a child refers to the personal implications it involves for the father.

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- In other words, being a father is a response to a demand, to a social mandate. Having a child is part of a personal project that is no longer imposed, and has a more emotional connotation. It means contact with a new being who will trigger a wealth of feelings and experiences never felt before.

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- Our research focused especially on the first born, as they trigger the whole process of fatherhood, a process that should remain in place for ever, regardless of the ups and downs of the couple. This is what we call "sustainable fatherhood". The first child concentrates the intensity of the decision, triggers all the changes in life, and arouses intense feelings and emotions. Also, with the first child, the new and increasingly common model of Spanish family is formed, the so-called "triangular family", given the decreased birthrate and the older start of reproduction.

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- After the first child, the affective intensity does not decrease but other issues come to bear, such as financial needs, work requirements, etc. The issues are similar to those that surfaced with the first born, but with the second or third born, the analysis of these problems often makes parents give up.

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- The first born has additional implications. In terms of the life stages of the individual, having the first child is a new "rite of passage" into adulthood. Why? When the experiences of young fathers are analyzed, it becomes apparent that abandoning youth and stepping into adulthood is accompanied by a feeling of nostalgia over their lost freedom, irresponsibility, and night leisure –to sum up, "the good life."

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- This is one of the reasons to delay fatherhood, in addition to other structural obstacles, i.e., housing, employment, which are often offset by a dislike for seeing oneself turn into an old father: "I don't want to be an old man when my son is twenty." Added to this is the "aesthetic" perception associated with being a young father. The image of a young father playing with his children looks "nicer" and more modern than the old, criticized image of the respectable, authoritarian father.

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- We have analyzed how fathers rearrange their lives after the birth of their first child. The arrival of a child brings about a dramatic change in the household, including schedules, going out, as well as relationships with their partners and their work setting. Many fathers have accepted these changes, while others consider them the price to pay in order to achieve a most valuable goal: having a baby.

- One of the most interesting characteristics is the excitement about this new stage among fathers. It is such a motivating experience that it makes fathers believe they are spending more time with the child than they really are. This is at least what mothers claim. It should be remembered however that, in one single generation, concepts and behaviors have been completely transformed. Where fathers used to be passive, and reactive, they are now proactive, changing diapers and feeding bottles most naturally. The social pressure, the influence of mothers, and the realization that it is not so difficult have also favored this change.

- In the mentality of the young fathers, the key step is to give up on "my time" to devote it to "my child." Having a baby is not only a major driver for the change in the family model, in terms of sharing and distributing roles. It goes beyond: the symbolic perceptions of the father figure and the mother figure are losing their most marked features, and are becoming more and more blurred. The roles of each are no longer –and predictably will not be in the future– exclusively driven by gender.

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- This is a great advance for the development and education of the new generations, which will be socialized in a more egalitarian environment where gender is involved. In our opinion, the proportionate part of the change belongs to men –more than to women–, who have had to dismantle a whole architecture built for generations, and based on some male values that are questioned everywhere in civilized societies. And not only this: men have had to include inside of their new “building” the new values of an advanced society, where caring for the others is a priority.

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- The desire to have time to care for and enjoy children is constant throughout our research, as well as the difficulties to do so. Reducing the workday is poorly seen in the companies, even worse than when women do it. And the children need it. Children need their two parents, they need time from the mother and from the father. A 2005 survey with children aged 10-12, published in *La Vanguardia*, concluded that children wanted to spend more time with their parents, but found a number of obstacles described under the category “work issues”, such as need to make more money, or to work more hours.

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- Devotion to work, the survey added, was easier to justify for fathers than for mothers. In other words, it is not only the adults who think that mothers have to spend more hours with the children. From a very early age, children themselves accept that the social rule applies more strongly to mothers than to fathers to spend time with them.

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- Realizing the image that the new fathers are projecting will not be easy in the short term. Progress towards a goal that requires overcoming obstacles does not proceed in a straight line but in a “dogleg” fashion, with many advances and setbacks, though the trend is upwards.

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- This makes us think of a transition, as the authoritarian and hierarchic father is rejected but without a no clear picture of what the next model is going to be. Progress is being made by rejecting a parental style rather by visualizing a new one. An example is how to deal with child education. This is a controversial issue where two attitudes are coming face to face. One attitude is defined by modern society, with its greater emphasis on freedom and autonomy. The other is based on the need for some discipline to avoid undesired behavior in children, which is associated with the old model.

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- Adolescence is the great challenge for the young father. For now, showing love and being involved in the care of the children is a satisfactory experience. It increases the father's standing as a human being as he is capable of providing security, protection, and time, while elevating his self-image as the father sees himself as a better person, and a better man, which is equally rewarding. But educating children is still full of mysteries. No matter how well fathers accept that their new role involves "being an educating father", they still lack the role models and the resources to maneuver confidently in this stage of their life.