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Fatherhood: a lockdown silver lining

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The first half of 2020 has been uniquely challenging. Covid-19 has claimed many lives and the quarantine has complicated countless more through professional, relational, and [mental health challenges](#). Anxiety and depression seem to be [on the rise](#). More than [36 million Americans are now unemployed](#) – 20 million members of the workforce were laid off in April alone.

Through the mist of disheartening Twitter headlines and grim projections for business and public health, Harvard-based foundation [Making Caring Common](#) organised a study and [created a report](#) which shines a light on one of the quarantine's potential silver linings.

Researchers at Harvard's Graduate School of Education surveyed a diverse cross-section of 1,319 American adults. That sample included 284 fathers. Despite these challenging times, M.C.C. reports that "68% of fathers feel closer or much closer to their children since the pandemic," and the results held "across race, class, educational attainment, and political affiliation."

Those fathers reference more quality time spent together with their families. They claim to be learning more about their children and participating in activities that are increasingly aligned with their children's interests. Children are reportedly talking to their fathers more, sharing meaningful conversation, and fathers are paying more attention to children's feelings.

Richard Weissbourd, Senior Lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, noted in the M.C.C. press release that "fathers, many of whom had previously been consumed by their work, have developed a new sense of closeness to their children during this pandemic."

Families are going on walks together. They are making meals together. They are sharing the uncertainty of the quarantine moment together, which includes conversations regarding fears, precautions, and future plans.

Under "normal" circumstances, quality family time can be limited for many reasons. Those reasons range from strenuous work schedules to the more complicated issues of limited "motivation or confidence to engage in certain aspects of child-raising." In fact, the United States leads the world in percentage of [young people living in single-parent homes \(23%\)](#).

This highlights a major concern. In cases where there is not a father in the household, or the father from the household is primarily absent, the likelihood of adverse child outcomes increases. [A report from Aurora University](#) notes that children from single-parent homes are "more than twice as likely to be arrested for a juvenile crime; twice as likely to receive treatment for behavioral and emotional problems; approximately twice as likely to be expelled or suspended from school; a third more likely to drop out of high school."

Though the Aurora University statistics do not necessarily hold within the population represented in the M.C.C. study, they are worth noting. Whether a father is entirely absent or essentially absent due to time spent face down in a career, it is clearly the children who suffer.

In addition to potentially avoiding negative outcomes, the M.C.C. report adds that greater involvement from fathers might also strengthen "cognitive and emotional development" as well as increase "the chances of academic and career success and life satisfaction." The report cites a [2007 study led by Sarah Allen and Kerry Daly](#) to bolster those claims.

One father who participated in the study said that "Staying and working from home has greatly helped in improving my bond with my little girl. It has brought us together closer than before... we play games together nearly every other day and I have become her partner in so many other things too. This is a remarkable improvement."

It is feasible that a father's increased presence in the household is enough to facilitate increased closeness. Increased presence presents an obvious opportunity to bond. Alongside the presence of opportunity, there might have been another lever pulled during quarantine. [Pain](#) and the [stress of disaster](#) have both been associated with closeness. In a variety of studies, vulnerability has been linked to connection, generosity, kindness, and "[a desire to stand together and support each other.](#)"

Another father shared, candidly, "I have become closer to my daughter that lives with her mother. I wrote both of them a note about things I wanted them to know in case I got Covid-19 and died. It was like my final encouragement to them to lead great lives. Now we all appreciate life more." Which acknowledges another potential side-effect of quarantine: gratitude. [David DeSteno](#) of Northeastern University has linked gratitude to patience, integrity, and [compassion](#).

Is it possible that the increased presence of fathers in households has combined with a cocktail of uncertainty, fear, gratitude, and other psychological components to create a powerful environment for family bonding?

The findings of Making Caring Common signal not only a subtle uptick in the closeness of families, but the potential to positively influence the outcomes for a generation of children. That is, if these habits of fatherhood hold. Eventually, the world will return to some semblance of its previous systems and structures. The pace of life will quicken. There is no guarantee that the benefits gleaned from this otherwise trying moment will last. It is possible that the relief of returning to normal will prevail and these lessons in closeness will fade.

The Making Caring Common report takes an important first step in holding on to the benefits of the moment. It names the improvement. It quantifies the impact.

For fathers hoping to hold on to these bonds, it is essential to name the habits and routines they hope to maintain. Have a family discussion regarding the highlights of lockdown. Was there more unstructured play? More storytelling? More cooking together? Name the highlights and work together to select a few shared favourites. Next, work to identify how those good times might fit in to a routine that looks more like the pre-quarantine norm.

If cooking as a family every night is unrealistic, then perhaps there will be a day or two reserved for that shared experience. A 20-minute walk with the family seems like it would fit into most schedules. Prioritising and creating a foundation of trust when sharing personal stories might have to be worked on daily, but it would certainly be worth it.

Meaningful conversations, deepening appreciation, and closer relationships could be the unanticipated benefits of the quarantine for fathers and their children. That is, *if* we take the time to name which experiences to carry forward, align them with the outcomes we want, and routinely remind ourselves of what is truly important.

For more on this report, reach out to the Making Caring Common Project: <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/>