Mothers don’t have the monopoly

Men are capable, effective nurturers and should be able to give it a go full time

BY ANNE MARTIN AND JEANNE BROOKS-GUNN

Father’s Day is Sunday. It’s a time when those of us who are lucky enough to have fathers in our lives get to celebrate. We honor our fathers as parents, thanking them for all they’ve done with a card, a gift or a family gathering. But by Monday, we’ll have resumed our regular patterns — which for most of us, means thinking of mothers when we think of parenting.

There’s a common presumption that mothers are the true caregivers in a two-parent family, exhibiting the supportiveness, warmth and stimulation that most critically influence a young child’s cognitive development. This raises the important question: Do fathers really matter?

Despite common assumptions about parenting, our research shows that in two-parent families with young children, fathers can be every bit as important as mothers. Of course, we already know that traditionally, fathers bring in the majority of the family’s income. But our research shows that separate and apart from their role as breadwinners, fathers can perform the same parenting behaviors that mothers do for their children with similar, positive results.

Most mothers will tell you that nurturing their child is one of their top priorities. In the baby and toddler years — especially before language skills are fully developed — mothers tune in to their children’s needs and try to respond appropriately to fulfill them.

Mothers are also our children’s first teachers, providing stimulation and expanding their knowledge base with early reading and playtime. But our research with a national sample of low-income, two-parent families shows that when fathers demonstrate the same level of these “supportive” behaviors as mothers, their children display the same intellectual growth over time.

Specifically, in families where only one parent was highly supportive when the child was 2 years old, three years later the child scored the same on IQ tests, regardless of whether that supportive parent was the mother or father.

We also found that in a national sample of affluent two-parent families with 4-year-olds, fathers’ teaching behaviors were particularly important when mothers’ teaching behaviors fell far below average. In these instances, fathers with above-average teaching behaviors — like showing how objects work or demonstrating new ways of playing — made the difference between children who later displayed average academic competence in kindergarten and those who fell below average.

Given that fathers can be capable and effective caregivers of young children, it makes little sense for our society to continue preferring that only mothers be the ones who are full-time parents. This means that in families in which only one parent works outside the home, the decision as to who should stay home with the child or children shouldn’t be an automatic one. Rather, couples should weigh a number of considerations, including each parent’s talent and enthusiasm for caregiving.

Also, our findings suggest that children raised by same-sex male couples may still reap the full benefits of high-quality parenting.

There are two caveats to our research findings on the importance of fathers: First, we’re only talking about two-parent families. Clearly, fathers don’t make the same contribution to their children’s intellectual growth when they don’t live with the family or they’re only moderately involved.

Second, it’s true that on average, mothers in our studies score slightly higher than fathers on our scales of parenting behaviors. In other words, mothers generally exhibit more supportive parenting, whether by patiently soothing a frustrated child or encouraging the child’s attempt at a new skill. Our point is that when fathers do exhibit high levels of nurturance and stimulation, their children can benefit intellectually just as much as when mothers exhibit those same behaviors.

So, when you think of mom as the most critical caregiver in the home, think again. Fathers matter. And that is a true reason to celebrate on Father’s Day.