



The McCall Howard Family

Mothering is a Legitimate Male Occupation

PAUL HOWARD

L'auteur — un homme — décrit son expérience comme gardien principal de sa petite fille.

When Fiona became pregnant we were travelling and did not return to Toronto until three weeks before the baby was due. We did not go through the usual prenatal classes, but got the recommended books, including the book on the Lamaze technique of childbirth.

We were mature people, well into our thirties and not in a usual work situation. We spent twenty-four hours a day together and enjoyed each other's company. This, naturally, led to my full participation in pregnancy problems and care, and I did the childbirth exercises along with Fiona. When we returned to Toronto, one of our first questions was whether I could be in the delivery room when our first child was born.

Soon after returning from our trip, a former colleague of Fiona's offered her some freelance work. Though we had decided neither of us would work for a few months, Fiona began working and I declined offers. The die seemed cast right from then. I would be the stay-at-home person, Fiona would work.

Ten days after the baby was due, on a day when Fiona worked until 6 o'clock, she began to have these funny pains. Two hours later saw us in the delivery room, Fiona doing the proper panting routine and me at her side coaching and watching expectantly as the baby's head started to crown. A few minutes later Penny's head popped out and she began to cry even before her body left Fiona's.

I was very moved, and tears streamed from my eyes, just as now, writing this,

my eyes fill with tears as I relive the memory. After Penny was weighed and wrapped in a blanket, the nurse handed her to me to hold and show Fiona.

Participating in Penny's birth was a powerful bonding situation between me and my child and I strongly urge any man to go through this experience. It meant that I was there not only for the conception and during the pregnancy, but also participated right from the moment her parts began to emerge from her mother's body.

Just days before the birth, we had purchased a house in downtown Toronto, which we planned to renovate. I would do some of the work on the house and coordinate the work of various contractors. I had lots of errands to run and on certain days I looked after the baby when Fiona began working. So, we made a sling to carry Penny when she was an infant, and she often accompanied me around town.

One day in the post office, a well dressed middle-aged woman in line ahead of me heard the baby give a small cry. She turned around to look at the baby, and seeing a newborn, asked how old she was.

'Nine days,' I replied, with a large smile.

'Where is the mother?' she snapped.

'Working.'

'Does she know you have the baby out?' she asked icily, as she turned her back on me.

Before her birth we had agreed our child would be totally breastfed, with no supplements, as long as we could manage. We had decided the baby's feeding schedule would take priority over our work.

Thus Fiona took Penny with her to the office and into meetings, often breastfeeding during them. On some days Penny would be left with me, and at feeding

times I would rush her to Fiona at the prescribed time.

Once, when Fiona was attending a board of directors meeting in a large office in a downtown highrise, I rushed in with Penny and was met by a confused receptionist.

'I brought the baby in to be fed by her mother who is in the meeting with your company's president,' I blurted out.

'Hmm,' was her non-committal response.

'I'm the baby delivery service,' I joked.

She called the president's assistant, who had been forewarned by Fiona that I would bring the baby in if the meeting lasted over a certain time. The assistant welcomed me, looked at the baby and told the receptionist I was Fiona's husband.

'But you said you were the baby delivery service,' she said. It was now my turn to be puzzled. Could there really be such a service?

Frequently I would have the baby all day, but would make sandwiches for lunch for both Fi and I, then take Penny to Fiona's office where we would have lunch together — Penny on the breast.

I usually took the TTC, so this created many opportunities for public contact. Several times, women, especially those of early grandmother age, practically snatched Penny from me when they heard her cough or cry. I don't think they necessarily saw me as an unfit parent but thought that as a man I could not possibly be capable of looking after a small baby.

I must say, though, that many young women, especially those with infants of their own, were very supportive. I often found myself in conversations with young mothers discussing such things as feeding and sleeping schedules and the kind of diapers we used.

I was sorting through some boards at a lumberyard when an employee approached

to help me. He saw the small baby strapped to my front, and said with a knowing smile, 'Son, eh?'

'No, daughter.'

My reply made him stare in disbelief and he walked away mumbling to himself.

Another time we became the centre of attention at a building supply store. A male employee with a West Indian accent, seeing the sling, asked if I had broken my arm.

'I have my baby daughter in the sling,' was my reply.

'Hey man, come look dis,' he called to his friends.

I was soon surrounded by five black men who were eagerly touching the baby, asking questions and who seemed generally delighted to see such a healthy child with her father. I couldn't have been more pleased and proud.

At about six months Penny became too active to be confined to the cot or chair I had made to fit on Fiona's desk and began to spend more and more time with me. I still took her to Fi for the family lunch, but I now had contact with her twenty-

four hours a day.

What has been the cost to me, as the primary child caring parent? It did not cost me my freedom, because I was still able to work on various projects. I wasn't home-bound and frustrated, as some stay-at-home women are described. If anything, the care of our child has made me more patient and considerate. I had my 'alone time' when Penny did. She always had a good napping schedule, which allowed me two to four hours per day of unhindered work time.

I did about seventy percent of all cleaning, laundry and cooking, mostly when Penny was awake. I had the satisfaction of knowing Penny, her habits and foibles better than any other person. When she learned new things, I knew about them first. When Fiona had the flu and was home for about ten days (Penny was twenty months old), she was surprised to learn many things about our daily habits that she had not known or appreciated before.

Penny was about eighteen months old before she had any serious illness and I was

surprised at how much it affected me. The first time I held her limp and fevered body (she had a virus and high temperature) I cried. Tears rolled off my cheeks onto her. Was this a weakness, sissy behaviour? I think not. I felt a deep concern and sympathy for someone I loved and lived with closely, who was helpless and unable to care for herself.

Penny is now over two years old, and is in nursery school for half-days. Our infant son is two months old. We are carrying on with his nurturing just as we did with Penny.

Fiona is back at work after a maternity leave, taking Peter with her for most of the day. He will gradually spend more and more time with Penny and I as his feeding schedule allows.

In closing, I would like to mention a matter of discrimination in public washrooms, especially those on the children's floor in major department stores. Something should be done about the fact that women's washrooms have diaper changing tables but the men's washrooms do not!

Letter to Mr. Eaton

Dear Mr. Eaton,

Recently a friend of mine and I were shopping at Eaton's Centre with our babies and were very disappointed to find that there were no nursing facilities available where we could feed our children.

We were informed that the 3rd floor washroom had a changing counter and a chair but there was no chair in there when we checked. When we inquired further into the matter with saleswomen in the infantwear department we were treated rather abruptly. After no cooperation and wandering around the store with crying babies we finally found a fitting room. Not a great solution but passable.

It certainly would seem that the colossal new Eaton Centre with Canada geese by Michael Snow could afford to spend a little more money on practical items like a proper nursing station (with chairs that cannot be mysteriously removed) especially when you consider the role of the female consumer in supporting your institution.

And by the way, since Eaton's prides itself in being up on the latest fashions have you heard that breastfeeding is 'in'?

Thank you for your attention and I will look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely

Dr. Judith S. Posner

This letter was sent to Frederick Eaton, President, and a copy mailed to CWS/CF.