

Stereotypes about dads are harming millions, family relationship expert warns

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Misconceptions and stereotypes about the role of dads in family life are not only rife but are setting men up to fail, according to a family relationship expert, who claims millions of families are being hurt as a

result.

That's the argument being made by Linda Nielsen, a professor of education at Wake Forest University, in her new book "[Myths and Lies about Dads: How They Hurt Us All.](#)"

Nielsen explains, "These insulting myths and demeaning stereotypes have immediate and long-range consequences for men, women and children."

Starting off on the back foot

Dr. Nielsen is a Professor of Education at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, NC, and an international authority on father-daughter relationships. She was awarded the 2022 Lifetime Achievement Award by the National Organization of Parenting.

She uses recent research to analyze more than 100 widely held beliefs about fathers which, she suggests, are putting dads at an immediate disadvantage.

Nielsen's research focuses on the dynamics of heterosexual parent relationships, and she argues that these myths have dire consequences for these families—including discouraging men from taking paternity leave, despite its [potential benefits](#) to them, their wives and their children.

"The fact that so many Americans are held captive by these baseless beliefs helps explain why many American fathers do not take a [paternity leave](#) even though their company offers it," she explains. "These fathers say they are worried that if they take time off, their families will pay the price down the road. Though their employer might have an official leave policy, many men worry how their bosses or co-workers really feel about their taking leave."

Nielsen says these fears can be traced back to societal myths: for example that the main contribution a dad can make to his children is financial and that children don't need their fathers as much as their mothers, especially as infants and toddlers.

Research shows, however, that when fathers take leave, both parents are less stressed, less physically exhausted, and less likely to become clinically depressed in the first year of their baby's life.

In addition, Nielsen's analysis concludes couples may be more likely to still be married five years on and the father-child bond may be stronger.

The maternal instinct myth

It's not just fathers being harmed by these myths, but mothers too, Nielsen argues. The idea that women possess a maternal instinct, which men lack, for example, is erroneous and harmful.

"There's no such thing as maternal instinct," argues Dr. Nielsen. "First-time mothers do not instinctively know how to take care of a baby—which is why they turn to the internet, books, relatives and nannies for motherhood mentoring. Mothering skills are learned, not instinctive."

"Too many new mothers feel guilty, ashamed, and depressed because they can't live up to the maternal instinct myth," she says. "If either parent believes women have an instinct for parenting that men lack, the dad is likely to feel less confident, less competent and less necessary."

"The myth benefits no one—not the mom, or the dad or the baby. The mom needs a full-fledged parenting partner, not a self-doubting sidekick. And the baby needs a fully engaged, confident father."

The myth that dads are lacking in empathy, that they can't pick up on their children's feelings and feel uncomfortable when talking about anything personal or emotional, has also been debunked by research, says Dr. Nielsen.

In *Myths and Lies About Dads*, Nielsen puts forward more than 50 years of research to show that men aren't any less empathetic, compassionate or concerned about other people's feelings than women.

What can be done?

Nielsen concludes "*Myths and Lies About Dads*" with dozens of practical, specific suggestions for combatting the situation—suggestions that directly benefit children by strengthening their bond with their dads.

These include changing workplace policies and child custody laws, banning sexist advertising as the U.K. and other countries have done, and showing film makers, [health care providers](#), mental health workers, children's book authors and toymakers, and educators how to do their bit in subverting negative beliefs about fathers.

The book also shows mothers how to actively support fathering in ways that expand women's freedom and choices in balancing the demands of work and family.

As Nielsen says, "As a society and in our own families, we need to do our level best to bury the myths and stereotypes that hold men back from giving their children and the mother of their children the best they have to offer."

Provided by Taylor & Francis

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