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Speaker 1:

Welcome to Dad Talk Podcast. Join us as we bring you cutting-edge information, research, and professional insights regarding the field of responsible fatherhood, produced by the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, where our mission is to provide, facilitate, and disseminate current research and proven and innovative strategies that will encourage and strengthen fathers and families. Now, here's your host Nigel Vann of the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse.

Nigel Vann:

Well, welcome to our second Dad Talk Podcast. This is the Dad Talk Podcast from the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, otherwise known as [fatherhood.gov](http://fatherhood.gov), and I'm here today to speak with Dr. Dad, Armin Brott. He has been writing and publishing about fatherhood for... I don't know. I'll ask him that in a minute, but I think probably about 25 years, is that correct?

Armin Brott:

I think that's just about right. The shocking is that is considering I'm only 25 now, too. So I don't know how-

Nigel Vann:

Yeah. Yeah. I believe you started that by writing a book called *The Expectant Father*. Since then you've gone on and written all sorts of books and articles. You have a syndicated newspaper column. You do two radio programs, *Positive Parenting*, which I think goes all over the country and *Positive Parenting for Military Families*, which is broadcast around the world on military basis. So you have a wealth of experience to share with us quite obviously, and I'm a little bit odd here that I'm leading a podcast with such a veteran radio host. So you're going to have to teach me a few tricks here. But I just like to start by talking, Armin, about how you got started, what led you to write that first book about *The Expectant Father*? When did you do that? That was about '95, '96, was it?

Armin Brott:

It was 1995. What started off was actually, before the book, I started writing articles that were snippy little articles that were really my lashing out at the way that I thought that fathers were being portrayed. The very first thing that I ever wrote, I remember was an article about the portrayal of fathers and children's literature. My experience with children's literature started the day that my daughter was born. I remember. It was sometime within a couple of days after because I remember her still being in the hospital. She was in one of those plastic see-through things that they put the babies into, incubators. I had been reading before the birth about how kids, infants like to see black and white patterns, right? That was what [inaudible 00:02:56] they like to see.

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Armin Brott:

I'm looking at the newspaper, and I see if there's a crossword puzzle. So I cut out the crossword puzzle and put the crossword puzzle inside the incubator for her to see. On the outside of that, I could see through the other side, was an article about Kareem Abdul Jabbar had just retired. So I always associate Kareem Abdul Jabbar his retirement with my oldest daughter's birth. I started reading to her as soon as she got home, and actually while she was still in the hospital, and I noticed very, very quickly there were almost no fathers in any of the books. It was all about [inaudible 00:03:31] and mom that, and is your momma a llama, and mothers are hugging their kids. Where are the dads, I thought. They are nowhere.

Armin Brott:

When there were dads, they were portrayed either as just bouncing the kids on their knee before the kids go to bed, or they were these kind of Fox characters who steal things and cheat and lie. That's not right. I mean, just think about what we've done in our society. We don't talk about firemen and mailmen anymore. We talk about the men and women of the military because there are men and women, even though 80%, 85% are male. We talk about firefighters and police officers and mail carriers because we want our girls to grow up in a world where they can do anything, right?

Armin Brott:

So we've changed the language that we use. But we don't change the language, and we don't change the portrayals of men and fathers. That really irked me. So that was that first piece that I wrote was about the unnecessarily negative portrayals of fathers and the effects that that's having, I thought, on our children as they grow up. Then I wrote another one on men not taking paternity leave when they had the opportunity to largely because of the way that we socialize men and fathers in our world these days is that in many ways, the worth of a man is how much money he makes in his position and his job.

Armin Brott:

So for a guy to take paternity leave, there are a lot of guys who were afraid. They're afraid they won't make partner. They're afraid that their coworkers will consider them wimpy. So they don't do it. I was talking about how that became a way that men are separating themselves from their babies. Then the biggest one that I did, the one on children's literature was in Newsweek, and then I did one on an experience that I had in a park with my oldest daughter, where somebody made a fleeting accusation that I had hurt a child. I wrote about that as an essay about the ways that men who are doing nothing, the men are in parts caring for their children, and a baby starts to cry, and somebody calls the police. This is really true stuff. This was happening. Or somebody falls down, and somebody calls the police.

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Armin Brott:

So I wrote that. That article appeared in the New York Times magazine in the same week that somebody in New York who had a contract to write a book about fathers had turned in a manuscript that had been rejected. So she through a series of bizarre coincidences contacted my agent who said, "Hey, you want to [inaudible 00:06:18] book. Wow. Wow." So then that's how the first book, *The Expectant Father* came about. It is and was the book that I wish I would have had at the time. It was already a couple of years after my oldest daughter had been born, and my second one was on the way at that point.

Armin Brott:

All of the books since then have really been the books that I wish I would have had at the time because I needed some guidance. I needed some information about how my life was going to change. I mean, we can talk about this. Well, we'll talk about this, I'm sure, today. But a lot of people don't know for pregnancy that yes, women have the vast majority of the physical changes that go on during pregnancy, although a lot of men have physical things that are going on as well.

Armin Brott:

But psychologically, the journey from not having kids to having kids is just as profound and life altering for men as it is for women, and it's largely ignored out there is that guys go into the whole thing, not knowing what to expect, not knowing how their life is going to change, not knowing how they can be the most involved dad that they can possibly be, which is I think a tragedy. It's a tragedy for the guys. It's a tragedy for the kids, especially, and it's a tragic for moms too who get a dad who is not terribly engaged because he doesn't know how to be.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah. [inaudible 00:07:40] changes the dad goes through while the [inaudible 00:07:47] was pregnant. Right? So the hormones change. So dads are actually becoming more protective and nurturing. Right? There's less testosterone. So men are sort of really being biologically geared to be a nurturing parent. Yeah? We don't even think about that.

Armin Brott:

No, we don't. That's a really important thing, and there's the woman who did the original studies, is a woman named Anne Storey up in Canada. It was really fascinating. We hear a lot about the hormonal roller coaster that women are on, where their hormones are going all over the place. With what Dr. Storey did was she took blood samples from couples, from the man and the woman throughout the pregnancy and after the pregnancy. She found that that men's and women's hormone levels track, they're parallel to each other. So the women we know have more estrogen, men have more testosterone, but we both have some of each. They did find exactly, as you said, that throughout the

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pregnancy and particularly right after the pregnancy, there's a drop in testosterone, and it's not the testosterone that's bad.

Armin Brott:

I hope we don't have to go down [inaudible 00:08:56] toxic masculinity or testosterone poisoning these kinds of things that drive me crazy. But the testosterone gives us drive. It makes us get out there and want to do things is the thing. When you take that away, you end up with not taking it all away, of course. But you end up with a little bit less drive and motivation to get outside the house and more motivation to stay around where you're needed to provide physical protection because... That is so much a part of the dad experience is the pride or protector, and there's nothing wrong with that. That's necessarily.

Armin Brott:

I mean, the mom who's just had a baby, particularly as C-section, she needs some physical care, and she needs somebody to take care of the baby while she's not able to, and she needs somebody to be there for her to help her get stuff that she can't get. So that's great that the nature has figured out a way to help with that.

Nigel Vann:

Of course.

Armin Brott:

The workplace has figured out a way to interfere with that by landing in many ways that guys get back to work right away. So that makes it a little bit harder. Of course, you can overcome the decrease in testosterone if you are not able to afford to take time off from work, which is a sad reality for a lot of people, is that somebody has to go back to work, and that's where the process of dads and kids or dads not having as much experience with kids or feeling that they're not as good at taking care of kids as the mom is because moms have all this on the job training because they're with the baby more, and the dads, for the most part, have to go back to the office, and they don't get the opportunity to learn those skills.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah. So that's why it's important that we have some of the materials that you've been writing to help dads there. In the sort of fatherhood field of programs that work with dads, which is really where the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse has its main point. A lot of what we do is to help programs that work with dads understand the latest resources, latest research, ways they can engage with dads, they can give dads. One of the sort of wisdoms, if you like, that the field has is that

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there's this magic moment at the time of birth when dads really do want to be involved. That's when if you can engage with the father then you can help him with. He's got more questions then, right? He's got more fears then. He's got more concerns about, how do I do this thing? How do I become a dad?

Nigel Vann:

So what would be some of the things that you would say to a dad, particularly a dad who really feels like he's got to go back to work. His job is to be the provider or the dad who feels like his job is to be the provider, but there is no work for him or he hasn't got enough money coming in. So have you [inaudible 00:11:55] things that sort of address those kinds of issues?

Armin Brott:

I have, and there are very different issues, what you're talking about. There's the common theme that I get, and I get this in classes that I teach for expectant fathers and in talks that I give. One of the biggest questions is, what do I do? What do I do with this baby? Overall, you start at the beginning, and you say, "Look, the only way that you are going to become a confident and competent father is by getting in there and doing stuff." We've all seen examples of moms are going out for the evening, and they leave the dad. The dad's going to be staying home with the kids, and mom's going out with her girlfriends. She'll often leave him a list of things that have to be done. The baby has to be read this story, and you have to have this bath and with these toys in the bathtub, and you have to have the peas and the carrots on the plate, but don't put them together too closely because the baby doesn't like them when they touch and sing this song and make sure you do that.

Armin Brott:

That's wonderful. Except if you look at it on one side, you say that's terrific. She's really helping them. But on the other side, you say, "You know what, how she learned that? She made a thousand mistakes. She figured out all sorts of stuff that doesn't work." Dads have got to get in there and start doing anything so that they start making mistakes because that's where it comes from. That's where confidence comes from. I mean, just think about an infant or a baby who's learning how to walk.

Armin Brott:

They fall down a thousand times, and then they figure out, "Okay, you know what, I did that. I leaned over this way, and I felt, 'Well, I'm not going to lean over that way anymore.'" Then they do it a few more, and you gradually, gradually, gradually perfect things. Not that it's possible to perfect parenting in any way because you're always going to figure out new ways to mess things up. But that's really the most important thing is I tell the guys, particularly young fathers is you must get comfortable with the idea that you're going to screw things up. You gotta get in there. You gotta start making mistakes, and then you figure out ways to not make those mistakes anymore.

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Nigel Vann:

So [inaudible 00:14:01] you really got to help the mothers see that right so that they create the space for him to have the opportunity to make those mistakes.

Armin Brott:

Yeah. That's one of the things that's really important also is for mothers to understand that they sometimes inadvertently, they almost never do this maliciously, but they sometimes inadvertently get in there and put a wedge between the dad and the kids. It's important for the dad to have a relationship with the kids that's independent of the mother. A lot of moms do this, and there's a lot of research on this, and the general topic is called gatekeeping is that moms will do things. They'll tell the dad what he needs to do, like that big, long list. Or they'll tell him that whatever he's doing is not right or that he needs to do this or that his standards of cleanliness are different or that all sorts of things, giving him the impression that he needs to be fixed, that he's doing an inadequate job.

Armin Brott:

If that syncs in with the dad, what you end up with is mommy's little helper instead of daddy, who's confident and confident again, competent and can do things on his own. The moms need to understand that, you know what, at the end of the day, if everybody still has as many fingers and toes as they started within the morning and everybody's breathing, that's okay, you win that. You've accomplished a wonderful thing. My theory has always been, so what if your kids are wearing two different colored socks? Okay. Nobody cares about that really. So what? If you get out of the house and you're at the park and you realize, "Oh my God, the kid's got a big glob of oatmeal behind one ear because I didn't comb his hair." I mean, what difference does it make that's not the most important part of parenting?

Armin Brott:

It affects how people see you perhaps. But it's not important. Moms need to understand that what dads need is his support and encouragement and space, space to be able to do the kinds of things that are dad things. I think there's so much that every... Every mom and every dad will tell you the kinds of things that are politically incorrect, but I think they're very true, is that men and women tend to, of course, there are differences, they tend to parent differently. Men tend to be in this, not that women aren't or men always. But men tend to be more active. They tend to wrestle with the kids more. They tend to roll around on the floor more. They tend to use bigger words when they speak fewer words, but the larger words.

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Armin Brott:

Moms tend to be the ones who will catch you if you're climbing up something. There's a great image, which we've probably all seen without really realizing it. If you go to a park where there's a lot of new parents, and they're carrying their babies around in their front packs, and most of the women have the babies facing in. Most of the dads have babies facing out. I had looked at the packages. It does not say on the instruction manual for the baby [inaudible 00:17:00] "Oh, dad's have to have the babies facing out, but moms have to have them facing it." It's not like that. But the moms are staying essentially, "We're holding it. We're going to catch it like this." The dads are saying, "Look at the world, son or daughter. There's stuff out here. There are trees to climb and things to do. Let's get busy." Those are very different things.

Armin Brott:

Both of them are important, and that's what the clearinghouse is trying to and I'm trying to do is educate dads on how important they are because that's really the most important nugget out of the whole thing is you are so important. You contribute as a dad something that is just as important as what the mom does. It's different, but it's just as important to your kid's development. When kids have mom and dad in their life to contribute to different things, they're better off. They're way better off.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah. That really does speak so well to what needs to happen to get the best outcomes for your children? Right. So I was actually going to ask you about this a bit later on, Armin. But in terms of the whole co-founding idea, which happens between a couple who are in the same household together. But it also has to happen between parents who are not in the same household together, who may not be in a romantic relationship anymore. Right? We're actually doing a webinar on this next week, which I think I mentioned to you earlier.

Nigel Vann:

So I just wonder if you could offer us a few tips for those dads in particular out there who are maybe more non-resident. Obviously, some dads are the main parent, and it's the mother who's more non-resident. But how can those dads and those mothers, how can they work together as co-parents in the best interests of their children and put away all the other stuff that may get in the way of that?

Armin Brott:

Well, I think that the most important thing is for the two parents to... Probably in their own mind is where this conversation has to start is they have to understand how important they are to their children and important the other one is to the children. You may be in a situation where you hate your ex, whether it's an ex-wife or an ex-girlfriend or an ex-boyfriend or ex-husband, whatever it is,

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you may hate that person. But the reality of it is, unless that person is doing something physically or psychologically abusive and think really hard about whether that's going on or whether you're imagining that. But unless the person is a danger to the child, the child needs that other parent, and the other parent needs that child, and it's important to support the relationship.

Armin Brott:

Sometimes that's really hard, particularly in situations where there's been a lot of fighting and there's anger. I completely get that. I've been divorced. I understand how that goes. You are not your ex's biggest fan for a while, and you are finding fault, and you're looking for any excuse to find how you can say, "Yeah, you're a jerk." We all do that. It's a natural part of relationships breaking up, I think, is you want to needle the other person, and you have to understand that you do not do that. You need to find ways of supporting the relationship rather than undermining it, that when you try to undermine the other parent, you are hurting your child. I actually had my teenagers who were born when a divorce was happening. I mean, they were three and five at the time. They actually told me the other day They're not teenagers anymore. One of them just turned 30, and one of them is 27. I keep thinking of it. But it's still [inaudible 00:20:42].

Nigel Vann:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. [inaudible 00:20:42]-

Armin Brott:

The 27-year-old said, "I'm half you and half mom. Whenever she said or you said something that was critical, the other one, it always made me think that there was something wrong with me." I knew that. I think those of us who work in the field, we know that. I still made a mistake every once in a while and said some critical thing about their mother, and she said a lot of critical things about me, and the kids get stuck in the middle, and they think that there's something wrong with them. It's almost simple trait that all these things that we read about and you hear about in the studies that kids think that the divorce is their fault or that the breakup, that their parents' relationship is their fault.

Armin Brott:

Well, they do, actually. A lot of them do, and it sounds silly. You think, "Why would a kid think that?" Well, it doesn't matter. They do think that sometimes. So getting stuck in the middle, using the kids to relay messages back and forth. Tell your mother this or to spy on them. Well, what's she doing? Did she pull over at the house? What are you guys watching over there? I mean, that kind of stuff is none of your business, and it puts the kid in a terrible position of having to keep secrets or having to lie or having to tell something that the child doesn't want to tell. It does terrible things to the relationship and to the child's development.

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Armin Brott:

So understanding how important you are, yourself, understanding how important your partner is or the child's other parent is and then understanding that you need to keep the child as the main focus, those are the big things. I think we can all get kind of bogged down in rules, and well, at my house, you do this, and your father's house, we have to have the same rules. You don't always have to have exactly the same rules. You have to have general ideas together. I mean, it's nice if you can agree on things, but you don't always have to agree on things. Kids are remarkably resilient, and they are able to handle different situations, and they very quickly figure out, mom does this, dad does that.

Armin Brott:

So I can get away with this stuff at mom's house, and I can't get away with dad's, or I can get away with that at dad's, but not at mom's. They're wonderful. They're amazing at this. It's absolutely incredible. That stuff, just so you know, I will get back to it, but starting at within weeks or months after the birth, babies recognize their fathers and their mothers differently. When the mom comes in, they tend to get a little quieter because they generally know that now it's time to eat. When the dad comes in, they tend to start bouncing around a little bit because they... This are kids who can't even... They can't walk, they can't crawl, they're months old. They know that they're going to get jostled around by dad who's going to treat them really.

Armin Brott:

So they are very good at figuring out and understanding that things can be different. So I think those are really the most important aspects of co-parenting relationships, is it's a relationship, and it's going to last until your kids are pretty old.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah. It's important topic we have been talking about a lot at the clearing house. I totally get what you're saying. I mean, I got divorced when my son was 11, I guess. He's 35 now. But I totally remember what you're saying about wanting to badmouth but having to check yourself. He would say something bad about her, and I wanted to agree, but I had to tell myself not to. Had I not been doing this work at the time, I wouldn't have... I understand how people get into those antagonistic situation. Sure. So it's particularly hard to some of these fatherhood programs because a lot of the guys who've come in, they've had this long standing antagonistic relationship. They've got child support there, and it's getting in the way of the relationship. So the fatherhood programs really do have to give these guys a space to vent and talk and really start processing their own role in this whole thing. But one-

Armin Brott:

Yeah, and-

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Nigel Vann:

Go ahead.

Armin Brott:

I think that there's a couple other things that are really important here to talk about on this particular topic I was going to add, which is, you mentioned child support. I think that is incredibly important, regardless of who is supposed to be the one paying, that that money is supposed to be for the kids, and it should never be used as a weapon. It's very tempting, very tempting to say, "Well, you're not letting me see the kids, or you're interfering with the relationship. I'm not going to pay the child support." You need to do the right thing. You need to pay the bill, whether you're the mom or the dad, pay the bill the way that it's supposed to be paid. If you have a problem with it, do not put the kids in the middle like that, or do not use child support as a weapon.

Armin Brott:

By the same standard, do not use a visitation or access or whatever you want to call it as a weapon either, "Oh, you're not paying your child support. Well, you're not going to see the kids." You cannot do that. It's a low blow. It's not fair, and it damages the children. So you can't do that kind of stuff. Then the issue also that comes up, which came up for me, and I don't know if it came up for you, but it comes up from for most couples probably is the new guy or the new gal and then-

Nigel Vann:

[inaudible 00:26:10].

Armin Brott:

How do you deal with that? How do you deal with a new person? I remember very clearly it was a real challenge when I got involved with somebody after my divorce who was very, very different from my kid's mother. The kids had trouble with that because they thought that they were somehow betraying their mother by liking the woman that I got involved with. So there's that. Then there's also a natural tendency to be of the other person, especially if there was overlap, especially if there was an affair. That brings up a lot more anger. But even if there wasn't, there can be a lot of jealousy and a lot of anger towards another person, and both as a divorced mom or divorced dad, you need to be as supportive as you can possibly be.

Armin Brott:

It's not easy. I'm not saying that this is just something that you can do really fast. You need to be as supportive of the other person as possible. Again, assuming that there is not any sort of danger to the

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children, and it's perfectly reasonable to have a healthy dose of suspicion or to want to kind of keep an eye on things over there. But ask questions. It's fine to find out about the other person, but keep in mind that that's a relationship that is an important one.

Nigel Vann:

Any tips for the dads on how to develop a co-parenting relationship with the new guy?

Armin Brott:

Well, I think if you can stomach it, at some point, go ahead and have a beer with the other guy. I did that at one point with somebody that my ex got involved with and just go out and say, "Look, I don't have any ill will towards you. I barely know you. But since you're going to be with my kids half the time, I just would like to kind of know who you are and what you like and what you're doing and things like that. If you have any questions, I've known them since birth. I'd be happy to answer it. If there's anything I can do to help make your job a little easier." Because again, keep in mind that this is somebody who's spending a lot of time with your kids, and you don't have veto power over it, obviously.

Armin Brott:

In situations of divorce, if you even try to exercise a veto, you would immediately get a terrible reaction from your ex. But you do have a right to know who people are who are spending time with your kids, and you have a right to express an opinion. If you're really concerned about something, talk to your ex because step-parents often don't have kids themselves, and they don't always know the right thing. So maybe they need a little bit of education or reassurance or something. Being a step-parent, as I found out from the woman I married, who became a step-parent immediately before we had kids of our own, it's a terrible job, an awful, unforgiving kind of job. All you got to do is just turn on any Disney movie practically, and there's the evil stepmother, and it's a terrible stereotype.

Armin Brott:

But I think that's where a lot of people get stuck in that role, and a lot of it comes from ignorance, is that they don't know what to do, and they haven't had the conversations that they to have with the person that they're getting involved with, the parent of the kids to say, "What's my role? What sort of responsibility do I have? Are you going to back me up if I discipline the kids in a reasonable way? Are you using my money to pay child support?" I mean, there's all sorts of questions that come up and nobody talks about because they're uncomfortable, but they can cause a lot of problems.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah. What you were sending before about having to make mistakes. It's probably even harder in the step-parent role because some of the things can be hard to navigate with the kids probably. Yeah.

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Armin Brott:

Well, as high as the divorce rates are for first time marriages, they're even higher for second and third time marriages, largely because of that is because the couple that's starting that's made up of a parent and a non-parent often, they have all sorts of problems that they must deal with. I think most of those relationships that fall apart. I can't give you a figure. I don't know exactly, but a healthy percentage of those relationships that break up because of conversations that they should've had.

Nigel Vann:

Yep. So [inaudible 00:31:01]. So I really wanted to learn a bit about how you got into the radio business, how you became Dr. Dad, right? Is that when you became Dr. Dad, when you started doing the [inaudible 00:31:11] radio show?

Armin Brott:

No. Actually, I started with the books. I was [crosstalk 00:31:16]-

Nigel Vann:

[crosstalk 00:31:16].

Armin Brott:

'95, '96 was the very, very early days of the internet, and some friend of mine who was running a website at the time, and one of the early websites says, "You've got to lock up Mr. Dad as a URL." I said, "What's a URL." So he booked it for me back then [crosstalk 00:31:38]-

Nigel Vann:

All right. Cool. Yeah.

Armin Brott:

It was one of these things. Well, it's all about branding. So it really started there. But the radio came not that far after the first book came out, The Expectant Father that we talked about. It was on a radio show in San Francisco, and we had a really nice conversation with the host, and then afterwards, she said, "You have a nice, relaxed voice. Have you ever thought about doing radio?" I said, "No. I think about a lot of stuff." She said, "Well, why don't you come back next week, and we'll do a demo?"

Armin Brott:

So we did a demo and [inaudible 00:32:14] and Positive Parenting was born in that station picked it up, and it just has grown steadily over the years. I mean, like a lot of things, I didn't start off wanting to be a

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writer. I didn't start off wanting to be a radio person. But they came up and I realized as I was doing, and yeah, this is exactly what I need to be doing right now.

Nigel Vann:

The radio shows, are they usually you interviewing somebody, or do you do them just on your own to talk about a particular issue sometimes?

Armin Brott:

Well, there's a combination. It depends on which show. So there's a shorter version, a half hour version, has one long interview and then a couple of small segments. I usually do one of my newspaper columns. I'll modify it for radio. So there's just an advice section where I'm talking. Then the longer version, the one that's on the military stations, you mentioned, the American Forces Network, that's 55 minutes. So that has two interviews, and then it also has a longer version of that advice piece. So there's some of just me talking, just myself, and then the majority of the time is taken up in a format like this, which we're just talking. Usually, it's somebody who's got a book or a researcher or somebody who's got some interesting ideas, an article that I read in a newspaper or online, somewhere where I'll try to get that person on to talk about it.

Armin Brott:

As you'll discover, as you do this more and more, it's fascinating. I mean, I'm not saying that I'm necessarily fit in this category, but the people that I interview usually are really interesting people, and they've got some interesting things to say. So it's like going to school. It's like taking a college course and whatever it is. I get to spend 45 minutes with somebody just chatting about interesting stuff and learning as much as I possibly can. It's a wonderful thing. I've always thought about it. The image that I want to have is that I would like it to be kind of like me and the person that I'm interviewing sitting at a table in a coffee shop, and the listeners are sitting at the next table over drinking their coffee, trying really hard to pay attention to what we're saying because it's so interesting.

Nigel Vann:

Right. Right. How long are the ones that you do for the military families? Do you do an expert interview, or you just have two of the other interviews that you combine for that show?

Armin Brott:

It depends. I did two interviews, and I try quite often as much as I possibly can to interview people from the military community. That's a rather broad expression in the military community. Sometimes it's military brass talking about families of interest or programs of interest in military families ... I had somebody on from the Navy Federal Credit Union talking about financial issues for the military or various organizations that are run aimed at military spouses or that provide health services or mental

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health services for folks in the military. A lot of government officials talking about different kinds of programs or issues that are really big in the community for spouses in particular, who... Military families are moving on average every two years or so.

Armin Brott:

Something you wouldn't think about if you weren't in the military, that if you were the spouse of a military person and you're a lawyer or a therapist or a CPA or something that requires a certification, and you move to another state or another country, or you're a nurse, can you work? Can you find work? Your license may not be able to apply or to entitle you to have a job in a new state. It's one of these things that all of a sudden, it really became a big issue as we went to war in Iraq and Afghanistan. It became a big, big issue. So there were all these regulations that were coming up and recommendations about portability of licenses. That was very important to military spouses, whether male or female. Most of them happen to be female, but it was hitting guys as well who were nurses or lawyers or something, and then all of a sudden they go have to go to another place, and they can't practice. They can't work anymore. What does that do for the family finances or for that person's career path?

Armin Brott:

I mean, their resume starts to look terrible because you're working here for a year and a half. You're working there for a year and a half. You've got a gap at the resume because you're not working at all. The government decided that it was necessary to create programs where licenses were portable. It's not as easy as it sounds. It's not like somebody can wave a magic wand and say, "Okay, that's going to happen." You have to deal with the licensing agencies in 50 different states and a bunch of territories and get them to cooperate with each other, and that's not easy. So it's still underway to a great extent. It's a work in progress. But I mean, those are the kinds of issues that I, whenever I can, will get somebody on to talk about them. I remember I did a whole series on businesses that were run by military spouses.

Armin Brott:

There's a whole community of spouses who decided that, "No, I needed certification. I couldn't get that. I'm going to start my own business." Because those are more portable often. So there were a lot of really interesting companies, whether it's computer programming and web design or making purses out of discarded, scrapped military equipment. It's just fascinating stuff. But to let people know because I'm trying to make it as much of a service piece as possible so that people will walk away with something that they didn't have before. I mean, my attitude in writing all the books that I do and as many of the articles as I do as possible is I'm going to give you some information right now that can help you be a better dad, help you be more involved, help you become the dad that you want to be, and I like the radio to be that too, is I like to keep it as practical as possible.

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Armin Brott:

I love theory. I love research. I love to talk about that stuff all day, but at some point I want to come back and say, "Here's how you can take this stuff and do something with it rather than just learn about it." I mean, it's fascinating. But it doesn't do you any good, just have fascinating. You've got to have [crosstalk 00:39:03].

Nigel Vann:

Yeah. Yeah. No. It is fascinating on so many levels. As you say, the fact that you're... In order to interview these people, you've got to do a lot of background readings sometimes, right? One of my favorite podcast is Fresh Air with Terry Gross. I just think she's the absolute pinnacle of how you talk to somebody on a radio program and just give them the space to talk and really share all sorts of things. Right. But she has to know the questions to ask. I actually came to this country to be a sociology graduate student back in 1979 and was so scared that I was going to stand in front of a class of 60 kids and supposedly teach them something. Right. But I really learned fairly... I ended up doing this for the best part of 10 years. But I ended up learning that you learn more by teaching than you do by being a student. You've got to know the material.

Nigel Vann:

So is that the same for you in terms of doing this whole series, going back 20 odd years of radio interviews? How do you prepare for those? You must be learning an awful lot of information, or do you skim just to get some talking points?

Armin Brott:

Well, honestly, I can't say that I read every book cover to cover. I mean, I wish I could. I will read big chunks, and I'll skim through it. I mean, I found very quickly, tables of contents are really an art form, and I say this as somebody who's in the publishing world and somebody who's on both ends of an interview. If you have a table of contents, it's got some detail in it, it can really, really help to structure an interview. So that's important, is to at least know the structure. I'll read reviews online sometimes. I'll read interviews with the people online just to see a little bit what they're going to talk about.

Armin Brott:

What usually comes, you'll get these things as soon as your podcast is up and running, publishers will send you all sorts of stuff, and they'll send you a book, and they'll include it, and the book will be some public relations material, and sometimes there'll be a series of suggested questions and answers. I have made a, I don't want to call it a religious experience, but I've made a habit of taking those things and throwing them out without looking at them. I mean, it's really they're the most self-serving kinds of questions that are designed to elicit the answer about the publisher this or the publisher that, and I'm interested in information, and again, as I said, put the practical information that people can use as

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opposed to selling your book.

Armin Brott:

As the host, I'm going to mention the name of your book, and I'm going to say that it's really cool and you should get it, but we're not going to say... All right. Well, we can talk about later on, these things... How do you stop somebody you're interviewing from saying, "As I say in my book." Or, "I talk about this in the book. But we'll just say you talk about it in the book. What did you say in the book?" We want to know. This is not supposed to be some series of hints to get you to buy the book. No. I've found [crosstalk 00:42:22]-

Nigel Vann:

[inaudible 00:42:22] to be able to edit the material a little bit before you find a podcast then, right?

Armin Brott:

You have to trust the audience. What gets somebody who's listening... I mean, you and I have listened to lots and lots of Terry Gross, and I find myself often pulling over in the middle of driving, which just tends to be when I hear Terry Gross and taking out my phone and writing down the name of the author and the name of the book or the name of it, a piece of music or the musician she's interviewing, whatever it is. Why? Not because they said, "Oh, as I say in my book." But because it was really interesting, and I want to learn more about that. That's [inaudible 00:43:01].

Armin Brott:

If you can get the person you're interviewing to give them some information, there's no way they're going to be able to get across a 250-page book in a half-hour interview. It's just not possible. I mean, an audio book, so I can tell you that a 250-page book is about 12 hours of audio. So there is no way that you're going to get the whole thing done. Right? But you can get some nuggets out there. It makes for a much better interview for you as the interviewer, for me as the interviewer if the person is giving information, and then we can talk about it. Then we can say, "I had an experience like that, or my kids did this, or I heard a friend of mine said that." You make it into a conversation instead of just a series of topics and talking points, messages that you want to get across that are more designed for sales rather than information.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah. Okay. So you've done an awful lot of these and awful lot of topics around fatherhood, right? So I don't know, in the last six months to a year, what are some of the sort of hot topics that [inaudible 00:44:12] to your mind? What are some of the most interesting things that you've been hearing about and talking about?

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Armin Brott:

Well, I think there's obviously the COVID stuff, talking about. I'm kind of headed up to here with that. There's a limit to what we can do with that stuff. But there are reasonable questions. I just did a column the other day on a question that was from a dad whose wife was got pregnant before COVID became an issue and is going to be having their baby in a hospital. She wanted to have her mother and sister who are trained nurse midwives to be there. But the hospital says, "No, you can have one person with you."

Armin Brott:

So I was trying to encourage him to make sure that he, the dad is going to be that one person. So how do you deal with COVID? How is that affecting our pregnancy, relationships? How is it affecting parenting? How is it affecting everything? There's that? Then another interesting series of questions that come in have to do with drugs. In California and other places, drug marijuana in particular is legal for a variety of reasons, in a variety of quantities, whatever it is, but there's a of legality of it. So is it okay for a mom to smoke or to take edibles of marijuana or other drugs during pregnancy? Well, no, it's not.

Armin Brott:

In fact, for dads, a lot of guys don't know this, but this is an interview that I do with somebody who had done a lot of research on is even before your baby is conceived, if you have been taking a lot of THC, that can affect the quality of your sperm. It changes the sperm. It not only changes the sperm for you, it can also change the sperm for your kids too. That's a big issue, so taking care of yourself physically and watching what you're doing. So things like that are getting to be big issues.

Armin Brott:

Then there's a lot, along the lines of what we were talking about a few minutes ago, about the co-parenting issues from people who are getting involved with somebody who has kids, and they don't know how to form a relationship with their soon-to-be step kids, or they see that the parent is doing something that they don't like, or they don't know what to do. So how do you do that? Or as the father, how do I welcome in the new person in my life and make sure that that person has the tools that she needs to do her job as a stepmother.

Armin Brott:

Those kinds of things are certainly important. Then there's also just the general question of help. I have no idea what to do in whatever this situation is. What do I do? And generally talking people off of ledges.

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Nigel Vann:

Yeah. Yeah. One of the areas that we hear those kinds of questions a lot is in helping the young dads, the guy who's becoming a father before he's really ready to be a father. So he's still in his teens or his early 20s, and he hadn't planned this pregnancy necessarily. He may not even be in a serious relationship with the mother. Had you got tips for young guys in those kinds of situations.

Armin Brott:

I do, and that reminds me of something that you asked a while ago that I wanted to get back to, and I didn't answer it back then. It's incredibly important for young guys in particular to understand how important they are. We talked about this a little bit before, but to understand the role that they play and how important they are in their children's lives, and particularly young guys, particularly young guys in inner cities or any place where there's high unemployment levels, and of course, that's right now. But when we get back to something that's relatively normal, there's still going to be a lot of higher unemployment in certain areas, in certain demographics.

Armin Brott:

We talked a little bit about the provider protector thing. So this is where the provider part comes in. When young fathers who tend to make less money anyway, don't make a lot of money or don't make enough money to take care of their children the way that they would like to, they often respond to that by backing away and by not being there for the kids. I mean, this is a lot of research on this. It has to do with shame, that they feel so ashamed that they're not real men, whatever that is because they aren't making enough money to care for their family, that they back away.

Armin Brott:

It is so important, and it just practically brings me to the point of tears to talk about this stuff with these guys is you are amazingly important. A kid doesn't care if you have money or not. Take him to the park, that's free. Go to the library and check out a book, that's free. Read together, cook together. It doesn't matter what you do. You need to spend time with them. I remember there was a study years ago that looked at the 30 most important things to children, and money wasn't even on the list. We hear this thing, just sort of trite expression to what, how do you spell love, T-I-M-E when you're dealing with kids. I mean, that kind of thing, it's true. It's the time that you spend with your kids. Teach your kids how to ride a bike, that's free.

Armin Brott:

There's all these things that you can do to be there. You do not have to buy them things. You do not have to spend money on them on everything. Not that you shouldn't. If you have the money, great, do that. But I just never let the lack of money take you away from being the kind of father that, that you

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want to be and that your kids need you to be. That's really the essence of it. It's so important, particularly again, for young fathers to know that it's not about paying for everything. It's about being there. It's about being a role model. It's about counteracting so many of the messages that kids get who were growing up without fathers is because the guys who don't have the fathers around, they look for the nearest strong man who may happen to be some gang guy or a drug dealer, and you get so many kids growing up thinking that the way to be a man is to beat the hell out of somebody. That's how you [inaudible 00:51:01].

Armin Brott:

You want to tell these guys, you need to be the father who says, "No, the way to be a man is to sit down and read with your kids and to talk about issues and to talk about things, not by beating people up or not by committing crimes. That is not the way to be a man." But I think that the messages that kids get out there are tough, and the messages that so many kids get from watching TV and looking at movies is that fathers are buffoons, and they're they're idiots, and there's no sense in having an involved father around because he's just an idiot.

Armin Brott:

So it's tragic. I think we can... The work that you guys are doing at the clearinghouse and the work that I try to do is we're trying to keep this from continuing to happen. We're trying to get fathers involved as early as possible, and I realized early on looking at the research and doing my own research that by getting guys involved during pregnancy, making the pregnancy their own and helping them understand how important it is for them to go to the OB visits, to be involved, to ask questions, to think about the issues that are affecting them. They're going to be more involved fathers after the baby comes. So we need to catch them wherever we can, educate them about how important they are, give them the tools that they need to be the dads that they want to be in and that their kids need them to be.

Armin Brott:

Then we're going to help to make change, and that's what we're all trying to do is really as grand as it sounds, we're trying to change the world. I mean, there have been things that have gone on in previous generations that are going on now that we don't like, and we are in a position where we can do something about it, and I think that we're obligated to do something about it because we have information and we know what needs to be done. It's a question of getting it done, helping it happen. We obviously can't do it ourselves. You've got to get the guys themselves, but I think we're making progress.

Nigel Vann:

Yeah, no, absolutely. As you say, I mean, we know that kids do better if they have two loving, involved parents who get along with each other. But we also know that too many kids are growing up without

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that, without both parents in the home, which is really a big reason for the fact that we have all these father programs that we have the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, that we have the name responsible fatherhood, right? It's to try and help guys be more involved. But starting point is understanding why they may not be involved. Right.

Nigel Vann:

You touched on a lot of those reasons, not being able to meet the provider role, the shame, maybe the peer culture as well, when you're younger, proving your way. But you do also mention the word gatekeeping, and that's something that we hear a lot about when we talk to young fathers that she won't let me see the kids, right? Her mom won't let me. Her mom blames me. Maybe the grandmother became a teen mother and always told her girls, don't do that, don't do that, but now they've done it. Who do they blame? Do they blame the girl? Do they blame the guy? Do they even know the guy?

Nigel Vann:

So I'm a young man, right? I'm 18. We're in this situation now. I've got this baby coming. I really want to be there. I love this girl. I want to be there to enjoy this baby together. But grandma is not letting me come around. So how do I talk to a young father? How do I talk him through that? How do I support him to include that situation?

Armin Brott:

That is so hard. It is so hard. I have joked about this for years, that fatherhood to a great extent is a women's issue. It's the kind of thing that I think we're trying to... With the materials that I do, the clearinghouse does a lot of it is aimed at fathers. I think we need to understand that there are these other populations that need education about fatherhood. I was doing some work out here with Alameda County. We were trying to come up with a program to help people working in social services counselors, helping people with benefits. Sometimes they are not the most supportive of the fathers, those folks, and as you said, the grandmothers sometimes.

Armin Brott:

We need to understand that by supporting the father in the relationship with the kids, you are supporting the mother of the kids, and you're supporting the rest of the family, that when the dad is involved and he can take the kids and he's a competent parent, then the mom can get a job. She can work. She can do a lot of other stuff. It frees her life up, and it takes some load off of you, grandma or grandpa. Yes, I completely understand your natural adherence. So your allegiance is going to be to the person in your family. So you're going to support that person more than the other parent who's not around anyway.

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Armin Brott:

It's hard. I'm not saying that this is an easy thing to do, especially if there has been fighting or if the relationship didn't last too terribly long. But it's important for us to put these kinds of things aside to the extent that we can and focus on the kids and realize, again, that having the dad in the child's life is so much more important than not having him there and that by excluding him or keeping him away from the kids in any way that you're doing that, you are hurting the child. You're not hurting the guy. Yeah, you're hurting the guy. Yes, that's true. But that's not the best way, to hurt him.

Armin Brott:

You're not helping anybody. You're not really helping the mom. You're putting more weight on the mom because she can't work, or she can't get a job. She can't do the kinds of things that she would like to do. She can't finish school because she's got this kid she's got to be with all the time. So by supporting the father, by encouraging the father, by helping him get the kinds of education and tools that he needs, you are going to be helping the child and the mom as well.

Armin Brott:

It's such an important message is to understand that all of these things are interrelated and that there is fathers, and we talk about how the importance of fathers and kids are much better awful. It's not just in the abstract, and it's not an isolation that fathers and mothers, whether they're in an intact family or not, they are part of the child's world, and all those pieces come together, and they all interact each other.

Armin Brott:

If you interfere with the father's relationship, you're interfering with the mother's ability to do the kinds of things she wants. If you interfere with the mother's relationship, you're messing with the father as well. The expression I use when I talk about men's health, which I do a lot of work in as well, why we need to be, everybody needs to be focusing on men's health is the rising tide lifts, all boats kind of thing is that when you help dads get more educated and more involved with their kids' lives, you are helping moms. You're helping kids. You're helping society generally.

Armin Brott:

So if we can get to a point... And again, it's not easy to do this, I understand there's a lot of obstacles to overcome for people, but if we can get to a point where one family at a time, we can encourage people to see things a little bit differently and support the dads. We're going to be helping everybody.

Nigel Vann:

Yes. I think what you just [inaudible 00:58:48] conversation, full circle. It's talking about the fact that co-parenting is not just the two parents, right? We've got this big team of people involved in the co-

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parenting team, but the whole object is to try and increase the wellbeing of the child, and that's what it takes, and it's not just even the immediate family. It's also people who help that family. So we have to talk to social workers who can be helping the family. So I really want to introduce you at some point here to Armon Perry, who we did up our podcast with last week. He's a professor of social work at the University of Louisville and is tactically working to train social work students to be more sensitive to fathers and the importance of involving fathers in their children's lives.

Nigel Vann:

We've actually got another university professor from Denver who's in the school of social work, and she's going to work on a information brief for us that will come out from this summer on ways to engage fathers in home visiting services in other [inaudible 00:59:59] programs [inaudible 01:00:00]. So again, I really want to thank you for your time, and this is a conversation to be continued, and we're going to pull some other people in to continue the conversation. So thank you very much, Dr. Dad.

Armin Brott:

Nigel, it's been a pleasure. Thanks so much.

Speaker 1:

Thank you for spending time with Dad Talk Podcast, hosted by Nigel Vann. We appreciate you joining us as we continue to bring you the best in provocative, stimulating, and empowering dialogue. The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse has created a wide variety of resources to support and advance the work of fatherhood professionals and researchers as well as tips and resources for fathers. If you would like to learn more about the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, visit us at [fatherhood.gov](http://fatherhood.gov). We are also on social media platforms at Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Finally, you also can call our parent helpline at 1-877-4DAD411, that's 1-877-4DAD411 if you have specific questions or issues that require personalized attention. Until next time, take care and remember to take time to be a dad today. It only takes a moment to make a moment.

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