

A ghost story

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When my daughter Mila was 5 months old, my wife Melania left for a multi-day trip. This was the first time I had been alone with her for an extended period of time, and I felt very nervous.

Mila was not a great sleeper, so I spent a lot of time walking around trying to get her to doze off. One grey day, I found myself pushing the stroller through a shopping area in the city centre. The streets were buzzing. Everything around us seemed to be moving incredibly fast. I was tired and dressed in clothing that I would not have worn for a public outing in the “before” times. I caught a glimpse of myself in a shop window. I needed a shave, a haircut, and a new sweatshirt. I was in a state of disrepair. I suddenly felt ashamed and glanced around to see if anyone was looking at me, but no one was paying attention.

I felt as if I had become a ghost. Like in one of those movies, where I was wandering among the living, unaware that I had died. The sense that everyone seemed to be operating at a different speed and no one noticed me was the first clue that I had passed into a new realm. This reality was slowly sinking in when I noticed another man sitting at a café. He was at an outdoor table with a baby asleep in a stroller next to him. He too needed a shave and a haircut. His sweatpants needed a wash. Like me just a few minutes earlier, he was staring into the ether. “Another ghost,” I thought to myself. I tried to catch his gaze, but he didn’t see me, and I wasn’t brave enough to say hello.

If I had been able to read this issue of *Early Childhood Matters* back then, I would have had more insight into why I felt like a ghost and what seeing this other father had triggered. I would have understood how the rising prolactin and oxytocin levels in my body that were helping me learn to interpret and care for Mila had also created within me a deep need for connection with other adults. I would have found comfort in the idea that the roots of this sensation could be traced back hundreds of thousands of years. Also, the examples of policies and programmes described in this journal might have given me the courage to talk to this other father. I would have had more ideas about how to start a conversation and more confidence that taking this step would be well received. After all, he was probably feeling just like me.

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As Mila grew older and I gained experience as a dad, I became more comfortable talking to strangers, especially other parents with whom it

Introduction

→ Michael and his daughter Mila

was easy to find common ground. It was as if a new part of me had emerged, an extrovert I had never met. Today, this change in my persona is the source of much embarrassment for my daughter and surprise for my wife.

On that grey day, just seeing another ghost made me feel better, but now I realise how much better I might have felt if I had sat down to share a conversation and a coffee. We would have discussed how it was not just our kids experiencing rapid changes to their brain and body; as newborn dads, so were we. We would both have left feeling a bit less lonely. Who knows, maybe I would have made a new friend. Had I known then what I know today, my ghost story would have had a different ending – something that I hope this journal can help make happen for the millions of newly born ghosts walking the streets today.



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