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A Father's Role: The Ideal Relationship with a Son or Daughter

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MAJOR CONCEPTS:

- 1. Your role as a father is critical for the healthy emotional and mental development of your kid. Strive to be a loving, dependable, involved presence in your kids' lives. Be around, be present emotionally and physically, and be aware of what's going on in your kids' lives on a daily basis, so that they grow up KNOWING WITHOUT A DOUBT that they're important to you. Make time for one-on-one experiences, with each of your kids, regularly. Even when they're teens and not as interested in being with you as they used to be (or perhaps not at all interested), keep showing a desire to do things with them, without pressuring them. The ideal relationship is one where, both along the way and especially at the other end of childhood, you and your kid(s) are grateful for being in each other's lives. Things you do and don't do, experiences you initiate, will help to achieve this goal.*
- 2. All kids, both boys and girls, want their father to be proud of them. If they feel that dad doesn't love, like, respect and feel proud of them, it becomes a deep, lifelong wound, a self-esteem inhibitor. Some fathers incorrectly equate giving praise with promoting complacency. Don't underestimate the power of your praise; it's motivational in ways that expressing anger and frustration aren't. Keep in mind the fact that anger is actually highly de-motivational in nearly all circumstances.*

3. *Your anger is a threat to your kids; control and manage it carefully, along with managing your stress level (high stress = low tolerance).* At a primitive, species-survival level, an angry adult male is a potentially violent, lethal creature. Practice calm, thoughtful, always-in-control parenting when you're frustrated with your kid.
4. *Fathers nurture kids differently than mothers do*—for example, they tend to encourage the child verbally or with their physical presence alone to bear frustrations and stick with the task, thus often enabling the kid to pass the point at which help might have been offered by the mother.
5. *You are a critical role model in their lives:* You model what a husband is, what a friend is, what a provider is, what a responsible member of society is, what it means to be an adult. The ways you live your life and conduct your relationships have profound effects on your kids, in more ways than you'll ever know. Be a considerate, loving husband; besides the healthy modeling you're engaging in, it keeps your marriage strong and your wife happier, which in turn will have positive effects on your kids' experience of their home life.
6. *The teen years are typically difficult ones—for both the teen and his or her parents. A basic understanding of your teen's brain can go a long way in increasing your tolerance of otherwise maddening behaviors, and your ability to guide effectively.* Understand that many of your teen's behaviors are the result of immature brain development in the areas that control organizing and planning and delayed gratification and effective decision-making. *Their brains are under construction.* The emotional parts of their brain are in charge throughout much of their adolescence, for survival reasons. Do not add your own dramas or emotional reactions to theirs; it will only make matters worse. Their brains are very much wired to attach to allies and to avoid or react to perceived threats to their well-being. *Don't become a threat.* When attacked, or perceiving an attack, our brains compel us to either get away from the threat or fight it. You have to change your parenting style and expectations with a teenage boy. What worked for the pre-teen will *not* work, and will actually backfire. Your teen, if feeling regularly attacked by you, will either become overtly defiant or will go underground with his or her life—*really* underground. Empathy and gently asking questions, not logical lecturing, is more effective in getting them to listen to your guidance.
7. *A warm connection with your teen is invaluable. You should strive for this above all else.* We instinctively protect what we value. Teens who experience their parents' positive regard for them and a warm connection on a regular basis will be careful not to threaten it. It's too important to risk losing. *It gives parents leverage to influence their teen that they wouldn't have otherwise.* It also helps your teen accept discipline without a great deal of hostility or conflict.

With children of all ages, and especially critical when raising teenagers, a sense of connection between the child and parent(s) provides a context in which all other interactions take place. If the parent-child connection is consistently warm, loving and positive, and characterized by kindness, regular interactions and stability, children are more likely to flourish socially. Parents and children (of all ages) who regularly enjoy recreational time together tend to describe their relationships as more positive than those who don't. Adolescents who describe their relationship with their parents as warm, kind, devoid of harsh words, and a consistent source of love and support are more likely to initiate social interactions with other adolescents and with other adults. They are more likely to be self-confident in their relationships with others, to be more cooperative with others, and to demonstrate an overall healthy adolescent development and healthy self-esteem. *People who are the most successful in life are those with the best interpersonal skills.* Emotional I.Q. is far more predictive of success in life than academic prowess or intelligence level.

8. *It's normal for your teen to be incredibly self-absorbed, egotistic, and reactive to your limit-setting.* Arguing is normal for teenagers. They're practicing the programming of rational thought into their developing forebrains, even as their emotions are still dominating. Try to be good-natured about their debating you, and even about their criticism of you—*don't take it personally.* Overlook your teen's temper/moodiness; avoid getting caught up in attempts to change him/her.
9. *Every so often, ask yourself: What's it like having me for a father? Every so often, ask your kids the same question.*
10. *Whatever was modeled for you by your own father will likely come naturally; what wasn't modeled will take awareness/continual work. Seek help if this task becomes difficult to attain (books, counselor, friends, pastor, parenting classes).*
11. *Keep in mind that if your teen's "first family" (the one he/she lives with) does not provide sufficient nurturing, emotional and physical safety, and positive bonding experiences, your teen will be prone to excessive and potentially unhealthy "second family" influences (i.e., from his or her peers and the media).*
12. *A guiding principle to follow during your kids' teen years is: Let them be the emotional one—don't take their angry outbursts toward you, their contempt for you, or their dismissive behaviors seriously. See these behaviors as normal and temporary, like a storm that is passing through. They need to know that you can handle their emotions, no matter what they are, if*

they are to develop enough trust to turn to you like a safe harbor when they feel *they* can't handle them.

- 13. Combine/complement/supplement your strengths and their mother's strengths*; develop a unified strategy with your kids' mother in order to provide a full plate of developmental nourishment—emotional, intellectual, recreational, cultural—e.g., reading, cooking, playing tennis may be something their mother enjoys doing with them, while going to baseball games, working on the car, discussing politics may be more in your domain.

FATHERS AND SONS:

- 1. Raising an adolescent boy is primarily a man's job, not a woman's.*
Fathers and father figures: Much of your son's long-term self-esteem will depend on how valued and approved of he feels by *you*, (more than by his mother), during these transitional years from boy to young man. There is a lot you can do to nurture and protect the development of your son's positive identity. He needs male mentoring, from an expert who's been there. He needs regular doses of engaging in physical activities with you, and regular doses of earned praise, mixed in with clear rules and consequences that you establish and enforce. He also needs to belong to a group of close male friends, or a group of other males in the family, or a group that includes your friends, before and during adolescence, to shield him from its harshest aspects. Today's teenage world is faster paced and more connected to the outside world than ever, making it more critical than ever that you become *actively and regularly* involved in your son's life. He needs to feel your strong, protective presence in his life, where you convey in many ways the dual message: *I will do whatever is necessary to keep you safe and healthy, and I will also help you acquire the necessary skills to compete successfully in life.*
- 2. The adolescent male is perpetually struggling with a fragile self-esteem.*
He is continually trying to maintain or improve his status with his peers and avoid humiliation from any source. He will defy, belittle, or avoid anything that may cause humiliation (e.g., school, if he's not doing well). A teenage boy's self-esteem is largely based on how many skills he has and how valued he feels by other males—his peers, and especially respected adult males in his life. Praise him frequently; strive for a 5:1 or better praise to criticism ratio. If he is struggling to fit in with his male peers, it's even more critical that he experiences a positive connection with his father. Help him develop as many practical and recreational skills as possible. Keep him active! It's good for his brain development, for his self-esteem, for his health. Limit screen time. Set up situations that allow him to have heroic tales to tell. Establish rituals and routines that are designed to result in positive experiences together. Set up rites of passage at 11, 14 and 18. Keep him active!

3. *The best parenting approach:* Be a wise mentor. Never yell at him. Teach by *example*, not by lecturing. Your modeling as a father will determine what kind of father he will become. Your modeling as a husband will determine the kind of husband he will become. While modeling is essential in shaping your son's behaviors, storytelling is also a time-honored means of mentoring and guiding. Share stories of your own adolescent experiences, your own struggles. Include him at times in activities with your friends. Be a fun parent. Don't be the kind of parent who makes adulthood look like a drag (your son is likely to want to postpone growing up). Get to know his friends, and don't make critical remarks about them. Learn where your son's place is in his social group.
4. *You are much more important to your son—and his thoughts and feelings about himself and his life-- than he is capable of expressing.* Your teen son cares more about *your* opinions of him than about his mother's. He needs mom's love and *your* approval. What you think about him matters. Find things to praise him about each day. Show an interest in his heroic stories, resisting the temptation to counter with your own stories. How much or little of a priority he is to you matters. How you treat his mother matters. How you treat other adults, and how they treat you matters. How you talk about and treat your son's friends matters to him, and what your son's friends think of you matters.
5. *Adolescence is the stage of life when we develop lifelong habits (positive and negative) and lifelong interests.* Your thoughts and habitual behaviors will likely become your son's thoughts and habits—if not now, then eventually. Use this knowledge to continually strive to improve yourself. (You'll also be modeling this self-improvement behavior). Fathers and other male role models play a huge role in shaping their sons' habits and interests. It is these habits and interests that will largely determine the quality of the rest of their lives. Especially important to the success of his future relationships is the way *you* manage anger and frustration, including your ability to be non-defensive when criticized.
6. *The adolescent male brain, awash in testosterone, is designed to create an effective hunting and mating creature.* Therefore, he is independence-seeking, physical protection seeking, status-seeking, physical activity and exploration-seeking, skill-seeking, and sex obsessed. If it's not related to these areas, it won't hold much interest for him—i.e., *What's school got to do with it?* If you try to engage in meaningful discussions about school or his future, forget it; he won't be interested. Also, don't be concerned with his verbal withholding of information. You're better off discussing dramatic events you read about in the newspaper. Some of your best discussions will take place while driving on the way to, or engaged in, a recreational activity. Discussions that your son experiences as truly useful or entertaining will be the most interesting to him.

FATHERS AND DAUGHTERS:

- 1. Research shows that fathers play a critical, major, and irreplaceable role in the development of a daughter's confidence and self-esteem. Additionally, you are valuable source of, and modeling of, affection without invasion. Your solid, positive involvement in her life will help her feel secure enough to make wise choices in dating and ultimately in choosing a mate. You will be the standard which will determine, in many ways, the kind of man she will ultimately choose for a mate. If you have a warm, loving connection with her, she will likely seek someone like you and develop a fulfilling relationship. If you are absent, dismissive, or rejecting of her, she may unconsciously seek someone with these traits and attempt/hope to get him to love her in ways you didn't. These relationships are almost always doomed to fail. A father's loving, concerned, and lighthearted involvement in his daughter's life is critical to helping her feel safe and important as she develops romantic relationships with males, and in helping her make healthy choices in choosing a long-term mate.*
- 2. The Ideal Father-Daughter Relationship: When women describe the ideal father, these are the things they say about him: He's always there when I need him, he's doting, loving, nurturing, protective and supportive, affectionate, kind, patient, funny, always has time for me, never cross or grumpy, always has my well-being in mind.*
- 3. Females thrive on connection, resulting in somewhat different rules when relating to males vs. females. When having discussions with your daughter, listen (much) more than you talk. Express understanding. Be supportive and empathic if she's upset; don't try to fix most problems she presents to you, unless she asks you for advice. If you practice these relationship skills with your daughter, it likely will help you to become an even better husband (and vice-versa). Setting aside undistracted time to talk with your daughter (or making time when she spontaneously opens up about something to you), to learn about her feelings and thoughts and experiences, will promote a close relationship with her.*
- 4. Ask yourself: Would I want my daughter to marry a man with my traits? Which traits? Which traits of yours would you want her to avoid seeking? Try to change these latter traits as best as you can, and warn her about them, if she's not already aware of the problems they present.*

5. *Teach your daughter everything you would teach a son*—e.g. how to change the oil in your car, drive a stick shift, hit a baseball, fish, golf, understand football, how to invest...they'll enjoy mastering these skills, the connection with you, *and* bring these “extras” to her adult relationships someday.
6. *When things go well between a father and a daughter, she absorbs a masculine confidence in the ability to master the world at large.* She develops the capacity to trust men and feel confident in their company. She knows what it's like to be loved and respected for her mind, for the unique person she is. Make your daughter feel special and loved. Compliment her a lot, to immunize her from getting carried away by a boy's compliments.
7. *Daughters want to feel protected by their fathers, but not smothered by them.* Just knowing you're understanding, concerned and supportive of her feelings is usually enough (true with your wives, also). Again, it's about the connection—you don't have to actually fix it. Having a good relationship with their fathers is fundamental to a woman's confidence and ease in dealing with men. Women need to practice talking with, joking with, bantering with men, starting with dad. Make it an enjoyable, recognizable experience for her to get close to a loving, respectful man (i.e., a man who's genuinely interested in her feelings, her ideas, her achievements). You create the template.
8. *Your daughter is hard-wired for seeking relationships and intimacy with others, and is trying to manage opposing needs: the need for your support and guidance, and the need to be independent of you and chart her own course.* How you offer support is key to both her healthy development and the quality of your relationship with her. Be empathic. Be non-judgmental. Be a good listener—listen more, talk less.
9. *Manage your own anxieties about your daughter's developing sexuality without becoming unreasonably or unrealistically overprotective.* Develop a strategy with her mother in preparing her for sexual advances and sexual experiences. Help her develop her own standards/criteria for getting physical with boys. The goal is to equip her with life skills; you won't always be there to protect her. Fathers often see daughters as equal to sons—except when it comes to sex. Explain to your daughter your concerns about her safety, vs. about trusting her. Girls want their father's trust in their judgment (otherwise, the implication could be that you think they might be “easy.” Help her develop an awareness and strategies to deal with uncomfortable situations. A lot of girls don't know how to comfortably reject a boy's advances. Prepare them and then let them go. Talk with your daughters about boys, as you do with your sons about girls.

10. It's important that you are present and communicative with your daughter, and gradually hand over more and more responsibility to her as she grows up. This will help make her eventual separation from you as smooth as possible. Be firm and clear in your expectations and rule-setting, but also allow yourself to be swayed by a good counter-argument. Respect her peer friendships, even if you don't approve of them; don't judge them. Get to know any boys she's interested in. Be a source of "standby" support and wisdom regarding her relationships. During the shift from daddy's little girl to a developing young woman, what may feel like loving fatherly closeness to a child may constitute stifling, intrusive force to an adolescent.

RECOMMENDED READING

Why Do They Act That Way? A Survival Guide to the Adolescent Brain for You and Your Teen (David Walsh, Ph.D.)

Teenagers: a natural history (David Bainbridge)

Our Fathers, Ourselves: Daughters, Fathers, and the Changing American Family (Dr. Peggy Drexler)

The Everything Guide to Raising Adolescent Girls (Moirra McCarthy)

Unhooked: How Young Women Pursue Sex, Delay Love, and Lose at Both (Laura Sessions Stepp)

Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys (Dan Kindlon, Ph.D. & Michael Thompson, Ph.D.)

Father to Son: Life Lessons on Raising a Boy (Harry H. Harrison, Jr.)

Parenting Teens with Love & Logic: Preparing Adolescents for Responsible Adulthood (Foster Cline, M.D. & Jim Fay)

The Second Family (Ron Taffell, Ph.D.)