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Working with Fathers...Parenting: A Second Chance for Men to Learn About Relationships

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Working with Fathers...

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During the summer, while I was walking around Washington D.C. looking at the sights with my 10-year-old son, he reached over and grabbed my hand. I felt embarrassed and uncomfortable. Would his peers (and mine) stare at us and make comments as we walked down the street. He didn't seem concerned; it was his way of saying, "I'm glad we're here together," much easier than saying it with words. Over the next few days, I became more comfortable holding hands with my son and in the process examined my feelings of discomfort. I could trace them to my childhood where I could hear the voices of my 10-year-old peers taunting me for my babyish behavior. I could also remember the homophobic message about boys who held hands. I did want to feel close to my son and found that some of the barriers to emotional intimacy lay deep within myself. He was reaching out to me and I had to dig within myself to understand my reluctance to respond to his innocent gesture of affection. Our children challenge us to look at relationships in a different way that help us to grow beyond our old selves.

Parenting: A Second Chance for Men to Learn About Relationships

Bergman (1991) in a paper on men's psychological development describes male socialization as a process that leads men away from relationship.

"Male socialization is about disconnection from the process of relationship...Focus instead is on self-achievement, being able to be especially good at doing things or fixing things, being competent in the world...Becoming someone special seems often to be at the expense of being with or nurturing others."

Child rearing provides natural environment for growth

This article will explore the process of men learning or relearning about relationships alongside their children and how family educators can enhance this process. When we talk about men and relationships the focus tends to be on deficits, e.g., lack of communication skills, insensitivity to feelings, and inability to nurture. These deficits prevent men from forming healthy relationships with others. The response of family professionals to these deficits has been to develop skills training, communication workshops and to refer men for therapy. These approaches all have merit but we may have been missing a prime opportunity to assist men in their growth by not paying more attention to child rearing in the family context as a natural learning environment.

Male Socialization and Parenthood

The following description of characteristics of both men and children that lead to potential growth through interaction is an attempt to move in this direction. The focus is on the positive characteristics of men and children that are most likely to promote a better understanding of relationships.

Men's style of learning

- One of the important characteristics that a male brings to parenting is learning by doing. In talking with fathers, they often describe interaction with their child as their primary mode of learning about parenting. This has puzzled me at times. Does it mean that men learn by trial and error on their own (I can do this by myself), or does it mean they learn by being with their child and interacting with them. The latter interpretation seems more respectful of a style that relies on self-learning by doing rather than learning from others. In order for this characteristic to be influential, fathers have to spend a critical mass of time with their children to benefit from this style of learning.

Motivation for closeness

- A second strength that men bring to parenthood is a strong motivation to be close to their child. They often enter parenthood with a sense of loss or emptiness from the lack of a close relationship with their own father. This feeling motivates men to reevaluate and change male behavior patterns that kept them at a distance from their own fathers. They value a close relationship with their young son or daughter but need guidance in understanding and establishing this relationship.

Adjusting to changing needs of children

Infants respond to playful interaction

Children challenge male-in-control myth

Men model and expand range of emotions

Role of Family Educators

- A final strength that many men bring to parenthood is the ability to analyze their behavior to change it. This allows them to step back from a relationship and look at it from a distance to identify problems and to seek a solution. Since children grow and develop so quickly this ability can help men to identify new problems and to adjust to the changing needs of their child.

- The child also brings certain characteristics to their interaction with their fathers that can support and encourage the growth of relationship skills in men. Infants by their nature elicit nurturance and invite interaction. They demand caring and respond quickly to sensitive interaction that meets their needs. They also enjoy the playful interaction style of fathers. Fathers learn sensitivity by distinguishing the infant cues for comfort and playful interaction.
- Young children also challenge the male myth of being in control. The fierce expression of independence by toddlers sensitizes in fathers to their child's needs and desires. It also means negotiating compromises and yielding control in some cases and learning to do this without power assertive techniques. Managing a child's expressions of independence gives fathers an opportunity to nurture the young child's emerging sense of self-esteem.
- A final characteristic of the young child that may enhance learning about relationships is their emerging emotionality. Children display their feelings in an intense and direct manner. This provides men with the opportunity to interpret feelings and help children to gain control over their emotional expression. This process demands sensitivity and elicits appropriate modeling of emotional expression. Since young children mimic our behavior, we quickly learn to adjust some of our own expressions to model what we want to see from our children. In the process men may learn to express a wide range of emotions in a more verbal and direct manner as they watch instant replays of their own temper tantrums.

While interaction per se may trigger growth in male relationships skills, it may take more than just interaction to create a close relationship and enhance relationship skills. Family educators can play a critical role in promoting healthy father-child relationships and a new appreciation and understanding of the process of relationship by males.

The suggestions that follow describe some concrete steps that family educators can take to help fathers grow in their relationships with their children and in their relationship skills.

1. Identify parenting as an important opportunity for men to learn about themselves and relationships. The family educator can help define this as an exciting opportunity for fathers. It is important to affirm and point out the many ways that fathers learn alongside their children. Parenthood is a natural time for men to grow in their relationship skills. The focus is on growth, not just erasing deficits.
2. Emphasize the adult ability and responsibility to understand children as an important part of the relationship process. Understanding of how children grow and develop can be illuminating to parents as they struggle with the day to day interactions with children who think and feel in very different ways than adults. The reasons for understanding development are just as important to share with fathers as the information about child development.

3. Since men learn by doing, this process can be incorporated into a family education program for fathers. Programs for fathers with young children should include some kind of parent-child interaction time. This time allows family educators to share activities with fathers. It also allows family educators to observe fathers in direct interaction with their children. This observation can be useful in helping men to explore and articulate what they are learning about relationships from their interactions with their children.

4. Family educators can encourage the use of analytical skills that fathers bring to parenting to examine their socialization as males. What are some of the barriers that they may face in establishing a close relationship with their child? What are some of the strengths that they bring in relating to their child? The influence of male socialization is critical for men to understand as they try to grow beyond the limitations of the early messages boys receive about relationships. This can be addressed in a direct and analytical manner with the realization that intellectual insight is only a first step in the relearning process.

5. Groups with other men can be helpful to fathers who want to focus on issues with relationships that may stem primarily from their socialization. An all male group provides a more focused approach to learning about parenting and relationship building. The issues that come up about sensitivity, control over children, expression of feelings, how to express affection can be shared in a more direct and open manner among a group of men once trust has been established.

The theme of this article has been parenthood as a second chance for men to learn about relationships. Men can and want to change their abilities to relate to their children and to others. While the family environment and interaction with young children provides many safe opportunities for men to examine and rebuild relationship skills, it will not happen without some assistance. Unlearning of socialized messages about relationships takes insight, motivation and support from other men. We can capitalize on this opportunity by taking advantage of the motivation to connect with children, recognizing the strengths that men bring to parenting and focusing on the relationship process as it evolves between fathers and children. Child-rearing can give men a second chance to connect with the relationship process and enhance their capabilities to relate to others in a sensitive and nurturant manner.

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