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Working with Fathers...Future of Fatherhood: A Guiding Image

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I recently attended the **Family Re-Union III** conference in Nashville, TN. The focus of this conference organized by Vice President Gore was the *"Role of Men in Children's Lives."* The Rev. Jesse Jackson in his keynote address reminded the audience that "trends are not destiny." He called for a renewed moral commitment of men to care for children. As a student of future studies, I learned that our future depends more on our ability to create positive images than to manage or adapt to negative trends. The creation of positive images guides us towards a better future. The current state of fatherhood reveals a number of positive and negative images. In my own work with fathers over the last 15 years, I have found my own future images of fatherhood becoming more inclusive and at the same time more vague. Descriptions of fathers today reflect some of our confusion as we talk about the absent father, the abusive father, deadbeat dad, the reluctant father, co-parent, gay father, stepfather, house-husband, single fathers, the new involved father.

The dichotomy between the *good father* and *bad father* and related trends was outlined by Furstenburg (1988). At the same time that there appears to be an increase in the number of involved fathers, more children are facing periods of "fatherlessness." This division of fatherhood, and the increasing sensitivity to diverse family settings make it difficult to project a clear positive image to guide the conduct of fatherhood. This essay will focus on the basic ingredients of a new image — a cultural image we can "reach for." Positive images provide clarity, hope, and moral direction. The purpose here is to bring together common elements of the "good father" image that can guide men towards a more caring relationship with children.

The Family Re-Union III conference brought together many different people who work with fathers. While there was considerable debate about the meaning of fatherhood, I also discerned some key elements of fatherhood that appear to be "common ground" beyond ideology, family context, and race. There appear to be three key elements that were themes repeated many times during the conference discussions.

Responsibility

Men are responsible for the children they help bring into the world. They are responsible for physical support and emotional support. Beyond the family level of support, men have a responsibility to all children in their community. Men need assistance and support in taking on this responsibility for children.

Caring

Men as caregivers have the opportunity to develop a nurturant relationship with children. This ethic of caring involves understanding children, expressing warmth and affection and guiding children through growth and development to maturity. Fathers care deeply about their children, but may need assistance in finding ways to express this care to support children's growth and development as individuals.

Leadership

Fathers have to take on a joint leadership role in families, not the authoritarian patriarch, but the co-parent who shares child-rearing responsibilities. Leadership in child-rearing also involves moral leadership — modeling the behaviors one expects from children. Men have to move beyond the provider role, to community leadership where they take on a greater responsibility for all children.

The family structure provides a context for this positive image of father and while the structure may vary the key elements remain constant. There was a great deal of discussion about the critical role and even goal of marriage for the conduct of fatherhood at the Family Forum III conference. The common ground emerging from this discussion was that fathers (and mothers) must develop the relationship skills to co-parent within a variety of family structures — including never-married, married, divorced, and remarried families. The implication here is that the father-child connection is seen as indelible, not an accident to be erased and forgotten. This image provides an ideal to "reach for" and develop as a cultural norm. Questions about gender politics will need to be addressed as this norm is established and implemented. While the focus here is on "biological fatherhood," there must be a more inclusive caring connection of men to children not just in families but in communities.

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This positive image of fatherhood appears to circumvent cultural differences. There may be variations in how men express caring, leadership, and responsibility as fathers but the basic elements can be embraced by many if not all cultural groups in our society. I was struck by the similarity of issues that face both young African-American fathers and older white fathers as they struggle with new ideas about fatherhood and masculinity.

In summary, the image raises our standards for men in our culture with real implications for their behavior in relationship to women and children. It is an attempt to bring together some of the strengths of the traditional male provider role and the new nurturant father role. The details of responsibility, caring and leadership of men for children must be negotiated with women in the family context and the community context. This image is not a call for men to reassert "male power" in the family and community. It is a challenge to men to strive for genuine caring relationships with children as a primary characteristic of a mature man. It is also a challenge to men and women to develop the relationship skills to co-parent children within a variety of family settings.

As family practitioners, this image of fatherhood should affirm our work. For some family educators it may mean a subtle shift in thinking about families. For example, we tend to discount the importance and relevance of male involvement when we talk about single parent families headed by females. Males become invisible, unimportant, irresponsible, nonessential and perhaps detrimental to families and their children. This new image suggests that we take a closer look at all families and begin to think about how to include men in all family services. This inclusion will not be as simple as inviting men to existing "parenting programs." In many cases it may be necessary to reach men through separate supplemental programming (e.g., a Saturday program for fathers and kids or through special family events). Including fathers and designing programs for males also means that we must understand how our

programs currently serve mothers and not compromise or water down effective services to single mothers by including males. Our programs also will have to focus more on the co-parent relationship and the skills needed to navigate this relationship. These changes would involve thinking about families as complex systems and adapting our services to fit the realities of family life.

The Family Forum III conference and the pre-session on Male Reengagement in Families gave me a sense of clarity about the future directions we must take to support male involvement in families. There have been few opportunities for practitioners who work specifically with fathers to come together and begin to define some common ground and future direction. I also felt a sense of hope that a national leader with Vice President Gore's status had shown a genuine interest in this issue. The image outlined here is shared as an integration of themes that I heard at the conference and as a place to begin to forge a positive image for men in our culture to "reach for." We must have a vision to guide our work with men and the "courage to hope" that men, families and social systems can grow towards this new image.

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