



Relationships *The Adlerian Team*

Encouragement for the Emotionally Present Father

By Anne Bourke

Becoming a grandparent is as special and profound as giving birth but without the physical pain and sleeplessness! I experience such delight observing my granddaughter Lily's rapid development and the loving parenting of her parents. Like many other young fathers, my son has transformed the past model of fathering in our family by providing physical and emotional loving care, quality time for playing, singing, cuddling and taking responsibility for all aspects of Lily's upbringing.

In my work with families for over 20 years, I have experienced many varied approaches to fathering. Some dads are sensitive and available to their children, while others have more difficulty in feeling comfortable and competent in their role as fathers.

How does the emotionally present father influence a child's development?

Daddy is usually the first significant 'other' outside of mother's womb and introduces an element of separation between mother and child. This process helps to make the transition from family to the outside world. In the past, it was believed that a father's role began when the child was 3 or 4 and able to speak. Recent studies have concluded that male children need their father's significant involvement during the first two years. Little boys whose fathers are absent before age two, may demonstrate an approach to life that is less trusting and less industrious. They may also experience more feelings of insecurity.

Also, dads are models for what it means to be male and this impacts both sons and daughters. If a father has a higher 'EQ' or emotional intelligence, he will be open to a wide range of feelings to name, demonstrate and share with his children. John Gottman, in his book, *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*, says that EQ also means being aware of your children's feelings and being able to empathize, soothe and guide them. "For children, who learn most lessons from their parents, it includes the ability to control impulses, delay gratification, motivate themselves, read other people's social cues, and cope with life's ups and downs."

How can fathers be emotionally connected to their children?

Becoming comfortable with all emotions, a father can use a child's display of anger, fear, or sadness as an opportunity to teach life skills, and to build a foundation of closeness. This

process requires effective listening and speaking strategies with children, extensively outlined in the book, *How to Speak so Kids will Listen* by Faber and Mazlish, such as:

- Be aware of the child's emotion
- Listen empathetically
- Validate the child's feelings
- Help the child name the emotion

When a father is aware of a child's feelings and helps to solve problems, children cope better at school and in relationships with others. And when dads are emotionally close, their words and ideas have a more profound impact, as the child cares about Dad's opinions.

Conflict, discipline, and setting limits are all part of family life and when there is a deep emotional bond, mutual respect and caring, problems are easier to resolve. Being emotionally connected requires a significant commitment: being patient, understanding and available. Children who are emotionally connected to both parents are healthier, achieve better results in school. Generally, emotionally present parents raise children who are more resilient. While those children may feel distressed at times, they are able to soothe themselves and return to useful activities.

How can men embrace the importance of their fathering role with children?

- Fathers can explore qualities of their own father within themselves. They can understand how they are using their father's parenting style today. Dads need to do the work that their fathers may not have done. If our fathers were wounded by their fathers' absence, abuse or neglect and they did not acknowledge it, we need to make changes and grieve the losses. In order to change the cycle, men today must name, talk about and break away from the "boy code" described by William Pollack, author of *Real Boys*, which presumes that to be a man one must be strong and brave. Men who demonstrate feelings and vulnerability are not always supported and/or applauded.
- Men who focus their contribution by working long hours to provide for the family solely, must also find some way to become connected to the emotional pulse of the family.
- Men can accept fatherhood as one of the most creative and rewarding adventures of their lives.

Becoming a father may be less physically scary than birthing, asserts Dr. Pruett, author of *Fatherneed*, but it can be an immense threat to a man's status quo. There may be fears of loss of freedom, a partner's exclusive love and attention, and general comfort. While fatherhood can be frightening, new fathers can prepare by seeking help and support by reading, talking to other fathers, enrolling in a parenting class and determining their irreplaceable parenthood values. Rather than withdrawing, new dads can step up and embrace the skills to be learned, get involved in their child's developmental stages, knowing that they are contributing to the physical and emotional well-being of their children, partner and family.

References:

Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child by John Gottman and Joan Declair, Simon and Schuster Adult Publishing Group, 1998.

How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, HarperCollins Publishers, 1999.

Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood by William Pollock and Mary Pipher, Henry Hold and Company, 1999.

Fatherneed: Why Father Care is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child by Kyle Pruett, Broadway Books, 2000.

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