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FATHERS, FATHERING, AND FATHERHOOD

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This essay will consider the development of a boy's healthy paternal role, and suggest some of the emotional tasks required of a father. We will focus here not on child management skills, but on the ability of a man to meet a child's unique fathering needs. We will follow the course of fathering from the child's point of view, what happens when fathering is healthy and what may happen with disturbed parenting. Finally, we suggest some therapeutic recommendations for helping children whose fathers are absent, unavailable or dysfunctional

Though both parents have important roles in raising children, their roles differ. Children recognize this. A four-year-old boy given a sentence completion test: "Mommy . . .?" He responded, "Loves." "Daddy . . .?" "Takes care of." An adult woman captured the same concept by gesturing the image of a baby as a fist; her hand arched over as mother; the other arched over them both as father.

Judith Trowell, in her book The Importance of Fathers (2000), wrote: "When a man becomes a father it is not only biologic issues that are involved. Becoming a father involves psychological and emotional changes; the child's interests have to take precedence over one's own. In order to be mentally and emotionally ready for this, the man needs to have had reasonably satisfactory childhood experiences. He needs to have, in his internal world, carers who were able to meet his emotional, psychological, physical and social needs well enough, most of the time. They must also have been able to manage his and their own anger and envy appropriately. If not, then he needs to have had subsequent relationships (perhaps with his wife) that ameliorated early adverse experiences. The individual man needs to have a good sense of his identity, and also a sense of self – 'this is what I'm good at; these are my faults or weaknesses' so that he feels confident and worthwhile as a person. This sense of a secure base is important if he is to withstand the emotional highs and lows that are an inevitable part of parenthood. It is developed when an individual has had the experience (of a parent) who is reliably and consistently available, who (could) process and contain their own and their child's thoughts and feelings. Fathers who have had this then have the capacity to sustain commitment; caring for a child depends more on commitment and containment than on having glowing feelings. A screaming, vomiting, soiling child in the middle of the night needs commitment."

What ideally must happen to a man in order to become a father? In addition to caring for his new family in its infancy, the appropriate developmental roles of a father may be: 1) Inviting the young child of either sex to separate psychologically from, but not dis-identify with, the mother; 2) To help the securely attached child emerge into the difficult world of reality outside of the maternal cocoon; 3) To help the child of either sex discover his or her autonomy and individuality; 4) To provide a model – within the culture of origin – for a boy to assume, with pleasure, a male gender role identity; and also for a girl to enjoy her emerging gender role; and finally, of considerable importance, 5) To help children of both sexes control behaviors derived from their aggressive impulses and fantasies. Hopefully, the experience of fatherhood will evoke a man's love of his child, and that love will resonate with loving memories of his own father – a man who had supported his son's early independent development and had offered himself as a nurturing figure with whom his son could identify. In all of these important tasks, a father will need plenty of love and encouragement from his child's mother.

But although it is largely the father who is the agent of a boy's masculine development, one of the major characteristics associated with fathers is their propensity to display aggression and invite identification with their ability to do harm. Certainly a well adapted father's love and appropriate inhibition of his own natural aggression

allows him to confine his expressions of hostility to teasing and playful, but safe, risk taking. He will forcefully overpower his children only when he must, when reasonable demands for discipline call for their restraint. Unfortunately, many fathers have vivid neglectful, sadistic, belittling memories from their own early mothering and fathering, which may explode into action in response to stresses by a child. For fathers as well as for all parents, the way they were raised tends to be the "default" mode when responding to their children automatically. We therefore worry about those fathers whose memories of their own inadequate fathering have become the dominant forces in fathering their sons and daughters.

Nancy Boyd Franklin and A.J. Franklin, in their book Boys Into Men (2000) vividly take up the problem of physically and emotionally absent fathers. They note that in the African American community 50% of fathers are unavailable to their sons; 70% of jailed black men had fathers who were chronically unavailable. It would seem that many of these men, in their father hunger as children, have grown up, without being aware of it, to identify with and relentlessly carry out their own father's inadequate or criminal life styles – a tragic example of what is called the "trans-generational transmission of trauma."

The Franklins write that the sons of single mothers often become by default her manchild, friend, confidant, partner, and often the target of her passions – loving or enraged – long before a boy is ready for any such roles, let alone with his mother. Many bitter single mothers will demonize, devalue, and denigrate their children's fathers, and in doing so become the psychological gatekeepers to their child's imagined as well as actual relationships to the father. In this regard, perhaps the most important lesson is that a father is never absent in a child's life. He is always a live and vital presence – at home, in school, and certainly in the consulting room, whether we see him there or not! Powered by chronic father hunger, both sons and daughters will identify with devalued or criminalized absent fathers during middle childhood and early adolescence; and in apparently unexplainable acts of rage and spite, they will suddenly become disloyal and defiant toward their mother's former rules for good behavior. (However, this may be offset somewhat if there is a strong step- or grandfather in the picture.)

In such families it is always difficult for a mother to accept our therapeutic advice – that is to focus on her child's father needs, to tell him or her at least some evenhanded truths about her earlier loving relationship to his father. That even a long time ago there must have been something good in that relationship. When families are separated but fathers still available for visits, perhaps they might find ways to exchange factual information in their child's behalf peacefully, without fighting.

Studies of families of children whose fathers had perished in war (as in the United States in World War II and more recently in Israel) show the everlasting positive impact of a beloved father's memory on the lives of their children – growing up and grown up. So if a dead father can be such a powerful force inside a child, would not a living father – albeit absent, drug addicted, incarcerated, abandoning, or domestically abusive – always remain a significant presence in a child's development? Such a lifetime sense of a healthy support for a child growing up – or it may be deforming or malignant. But it always remains a powerful force in the inner lives of both caregivers and their children. The eternal presence of an absent biologic father will persist inside of a child, no matter where he is, no matter whether living or dead. A child's biologic father never really disappears, nor is he ever obliterated by a substitute, no matter how loving. And he becomes a uniquely enlivened presence, too, within each child, at every developmental stage. Again the corollary: Whether you can see him or not, whether demonized or remembered well, the father (that is the child's biologic father) is always in the room All this is to say that as therapists, we need to find ways of bringing the child's father, that is his family-of-origin father – in all of the elusive father imageries which have long dwelt in that family's paternal memories – into our work with every single parent family.

Often, it is very difficult to help an angry single mother understand that what she says about the father of her children will always have a profound influence on how they turn out; and that it will help to recognize that narratives will play an important part in whomever he or she will become as a growing child or adult.

After hearing a mother's terribly condemning stories about a six-year-old girl's incarcerated father, I asked her daughter what she remembered about him. She drew for me a picture of him buying her and her brother ice cream cones; then another of him kneeling next to her for prayers at bedtime. Was the mother's narrative about the man in fact dead wrong? Or was it only partly accurate, leaving out much painfully remembered love and loss? Is her

daughter simply idealizing her lost father; or is she in fact remembering something about her father which secretly buoys her up every day so as to feel more loving toward herself?

It may be very helpful for a mother to understand that, for her child, both masculine and paternal development began long before adolescence, long before middle childhood, and was in fact ongoing during infancy and toddlerhood. It is important for a worried single mother to know that her son's or daughter's new unruly behaviors did not just come out of the blue. If she can understand that they sometimes represent behavioral alliances with an absent father, she can then begin to make some sense about what her child is doing. One could say to her that, "Way in the back of his/her mind, every child has a wish to be just like his father. So if you tell him not only what you feel was disappointing about his father, but also what you knew about him that was once good, such statements will give your child more balanced views to think about insofar as the kind of person he would like to become some day." Perhaps, too, a mother could say what she might have wished her child's father could have been for each member of the family. If the father is present, a clinician can ask, "How did you learn to become the father you are?", searching especially for his memories of his own fathering. "How did your mother speak of your father?" "What about your mother's father? Your father's father?" If the father is not present, the clinician may ask the mother some similar questions about the child's father, and also about her own paternal relationships.

Some final comments about where some of these ideas came from. There has been some illuminating work with resilient young children who have survived experiences of severe abuse or neglect without damaging emotional sequelae. These children were found to have strong images and accompanying inner narratives with an imaginary parent who was protective, loving and caring. In addition, successful fathers who had difficult relationships with their own fathers have often reported later life relationships with professional mentors, beloved teachers, close friends, and even grateful students who had become for them "virtual good fathers" for healthier identifications in their own lives.

In closing, I want to urge, as we work with every family, father absent or not, that we keep in mind that a mother's experience of her child's father will in all likelihood be very different from the child's, and that no matter how monolithic her story of a father's evils may seem to be, there will always be distortions. Despite a mother's frequent attempts to be a gatekeeper to a paternal relationship, most fathers have tried to give something of themselves early in their new fatherhood. In my own experience, even the worst fathers yearned, once-upon-a-time, to be good dads to their children.

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