

A Blueprint to Relationships: Building Your Role as Dad (Part One)

Father's Day is only days away. So, this post is for the dads! Tuck this article in your favorite father's briefcase or lunchbox. If you're a professional, email it or post it on your agency's facebook. We all want to work to be more inclusive of adoptive fathers. We know that when kids have two psychologically active parents they are,

- Exposed to a diverse array of interests and activities
- More socially flexible
- More successful in academic endeavors
- More successful in athletic endeavors
- Higher in self-esteem
- Better able to problem solve
- Less impulsive
- Stronger in moral development/empathic concern for others
- Less stereotypical with people regarding gender issues
- More resilient at times of maximum stress
- Less likely to engage in various types of risk-taking behaviors
- More satisfied with family life and sibling relationships (Lamb, 1997; Bilker & Trotter, 1994 & Pruett, 1987 & 2000).

Yet, frequently, in therapy sessions, it is quite common to hear men report, "I'm not sure how to be a dad." "I didn't have a role-model growing up." "I wasn't all that close to my dad." Certainly, when dealing with children with trauma, the matter may become compounded. Sons and daughters who have [attachment-issues](#) complicate parenting relationships.

This post offers some thoughts, for dads, regarding mapping a strong course—a blueprint—with all their children. This blog looks at the messages received about masculinity while growing up. Reviewing messages—altering as necessary—allows men to design their role as fathers.

Today and Thursday, we'll look at some common messages men receive, and we'll also offer ideas about how dads can build on or outline their blueprint of improved relationships with their children.

"Messages" About Masculinity: Growing Up

Unfortunately, fathers spend less time than do mothers interacting with their preschool, school age, adolescent and college age children (Lamb, 1997 and 2003). This may be due to genuine employment demands such as long hours and traveling. This may also be due to how a father defines his role in the family. If he perceives himself as the breadwinner, he may not see the need to contribute to his family in other ways. He may not have experienced an involved, close relationship with his own father. So, he lacks a blueprint for fathering. He may have antiquated perceptions of masculinity—thinking, for example, that intimate, caring, nurturing interactions are counter to being a man. Wives' attitudes toward the fathering role and experiences with their own fathers have been found to strongly predict the behavior of their husbands. Men are more likely to be highly involved caregivers if their wives view their own fathers as having been nurturing (Lamb, 1997; Radin, 1981 & 1986).

Male socialization clearly impacts fathering. In general, many men were taught as young boys that they need to act tough in order to be seen as strong, never ask for help so as to be

considered independent, give orders to be in control at all times and stuff emotions except for anger to be perceived as a real man. Such qualities obviously do not contribute to the development of a healthy father.

Paul, father of three adopted children (now adolescents), two with mental health issues stated,

“I really don’t know. By nature I think that dads are prone to drift toward a Lone Ranger or John Wayne sort of parenting model. We’re supposed to be tough. We’re supposed to have all the answers. Kids with mental health issues put us so far out of our element that we don’t even begin to know how to deal with it. Somehow dads need to know that they’re not alone and that it’s okay to ask for help. One of the biggest hurdles dads face is in reaching a point where they are willing to ask for help. Dads need to understand that they risk losing too much if they try to go it alone.”

A capable father needs to understand the “messages” about masculinity that he received as a boy growing up and consciously select those qualities that he knows will help make him be a good man and a connected father. As stated earlier, all children benefit from the active engagement of men who are open to connecting, teaching and modeling appropriate ways to interact.

“Messages” about Masculinity: Media Influence

Media portrayals of what it means to be a man are plagued with stereotypes. The organization, [Children Now](#) released the report, [Boys to Men: Entertainment Media Messages about Masculinity](#). The report contains the survey results of 1,200 young people, ages 10 to 17 and information from focus groups in which boys offered their own insights into the media they consume. Some of the results include:

- While male characters in the media display a range of emotional behavior—fear, anger, grief—they are rarely observed crying.
- The majority of the survey respondents described males on television as violent and angry.
- Across boys’ favorite media, men are closely identified with the working world and high prestige positions. Women continue to be identified with domestic life. Overall, men are defined by their careers and not by their relationships.
- White male characters are consistently more motivated than minorities by succeeding in work. Minority males are consistently more motivated than Whites by pro-social behavior (i.e., offering advice, talking about feelings, helping others, providing affection).
- Men of color are more likely than white men to engage in physical aggression with weapons.
- Male (and female) characters are largely heterosexual—1% is homosexual or bisexual.

According to the [Media Awareness Network](#), professional sports are an area that continues to be male dominated—from the players to the coaches to the commentators. This organization states that sports commentary reinforces perceptions of violent masculinity by praising athletes who continue to play while injured, and by the language utilized to describe the action occurring during games. Certainly, the poor conduct of many major league stars combined with the publicity that accompanies such behavior contributes to skew the male image further. This situation overshadows those players who live and play by high moral standards—features about such athletes are rare.

On a different scale from an adoptive father,

For my daughter's second Christmas, I had ordered a child's audiotape that was called Songs for Hannah. The company weaves the name of your child into each of the six songs on the tape. When Hannah opened our gift on Christmas Eve, she immediately wanted me to find the tape player so we could play the songs for her.

The second song on the tape was called the Alphabet Song. As we listened to it together, we heard the musician sing A is for apple; B is for birdie and so on. We heard G is for grandma and M is for mommy. Unfortunately, we also heard her sing D is for doggie and F is for froggy. As we went through the tape, we heard no letters symbolizing her dad.

In the entire 26 letters of the alphabet that my 20-month old daughter was learning, this major toy company was selling products that offered NO reference to a father figure.

Overall, regarding sports, television, Internet, music CDs, radio, video and computer games, advertisements and movies, we must ask, "What messages do dads and boys—future fathers—receive about their roles as men, fathers, partners, etc.?" "How do these messages influence the way they carry out their roles?"