

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

Welcome to part two of our post about drawing a blueprint to better relationships with your children. This post is for dads in honor of Father's Day!

In Part One, we looked at the messages dads received—growing up—about masculinity and via the media. Today, we'll look at the messages fathers learned about nurture. Then, we'll offer some food for thought about re-designing all of this information. The end result is enhanced relationships between fathers and all their children!

"Messages" about Nurture

Men also need to explore the "messages" they received about nurture as boys and adolescents. The message about nurturing is often that it is a feminine only quality. It is true that maternal nurturing is a female quality, but paternal nurturing is a masculine quality. Fathers nurture children in ways that are different than, but not better or worse than, how mothers nurture.

All children need nurture. Yet, the traumatized child needs even more! It is a lack of nurture—neglect—that has left the adopted son or daughter riddled with behavioral problems, developmental delays, irrational thinking and so on. These children fare better with both, father and mother nurture.

One dad shares that,

Because my parents were divorced and I lived with my mother as a child, I think that my initial inclination towards parenting was that it ought to involve nurturing. For my mother though, nurturing usually meant something artificial and unproductive like pampering or coddling. Personally, I felt as though I never received the message that I could do things myself; things were usually done for me and the unspoken message was that "I wasn't competent." So when we brought our three adopted children home, my first instinct was pity; I felt as though I should be coddling them. And that seemed to be what most people speculated that they needed. It's a pretty natural conclusion; they've had a hard life so we should feel bad for them and make things easy.

But, pity focuses too much on the past while giving up structure in the present. Whether they showed it or not, and our children showed it in strange and bizarre behaviors, they were scared and what our children desperately needed was safety. For them, structure was safety. What they had lacked for all of their young lives was stability. My wife and I both caught this concept very early on, and I'm proud of that because I think our children could have lost years if we had done it any differently.

I should mention, though, that because my parents had such an affected style of nurturing, it is a constant struggle for me to not rely on structure to the exclusion of any identification with them as individuals. I'm still finding my balance as the "parent who's in charge" and the "parent who relates." This seems like a continual process.

Across all studied cultures, one of the primary ways that fathers engage—nurture—their children is through play. Many times it is the "rough and tumble" play that fathers and young children appear to truly enjoy as a method of relating to one another. This is shaped by cultural messages around play, but it typically takes the form of tossing the child in the air,

roughhousing, tickling, pillow fights, tug-of-wars, wrestling, interactive sports—especially contact sports—and other types of hands-on father/child interaction. As this is considered an innate expression of their paternal instincts, adoptive fathers would also share the tendency to play with their children in this manner.

An important contribution of paternal involvement is the predisposition of fathers to activate their children in order to engage with them. Children from a very young age express the tendency to anticipate their father's energy level and playfulness that is different from the mother's. Healthy play teaches children important lessons of life, such as impulse control, team work, considering others' feelings, following and applying rules, swift judgment calls and attention to task—more positive influences to add to the list of father's contributions to child development

When fathers rough house, tickle and wrestle with their children, they become emotionally stimulated—they are responding to a caring adult in a way that is seen most often as different from how mothers tend to interact with their children. A father's presence offers a significant difference to the child than the mother's presence.

An example of the benefit of play for children is a father playing “monster.” When a pre-schooler asks her father to join her little friends to be the monster, she unknowingly is inviting him to teach them survival skills and coping strategies. If the children run and hide from the monster and daddy eventually finds them, they each must decide how they are going to respond to this perceived threat. One child might scream and laugh another run away, a third might hug him, a fourth child might cry and cower, while a fifth might try to hit or kick the monster. Each of these children is deciding, in a safe environment, how they must respond to a scary, silly, uncertain situation.

Studies show that mothers tend to use objects from their environment such as books, puzzles, games, crayons, dolls, etc. when engaging with children, while father will typically make use of his body. He becomes the jungle gym, monkey bars, or rocking horse. He gives piggy back rides, gator bites or “noogies.”

Thus, children begin observing that when they are with mom, they feel a sense of comfort, warmth, calm and support. When they are with dad, they feel a sense of excitement, action, and adventure. A mother tends to be more predictable and consistent in her one-to-one interactions with her child, while a father tends to be less predictable and more exploratory and exciting with his child.

It is important to interject into this the premise that parents, especially fathers, are frequently discouraged from touching, playing and showing affection to daughters who have experienced sexual abuse prior to their adoption. The rationale is that “rough and tumble” play may remind her of her abuse and thus cause her further trauma. This recommendation stifles “father nurture” and it denies the daughter the opportunity to gain valuable father-child development interactions. Our previous post, *Nurture and the Sexually Abused or Aggressive Adoptee*, makes a case for a “middle ground” between no touch and re-traumatizing this new daughter. In this manner, fathers and daughters can reap the benefits of father nurture.

Overall, men receive many messages about masculinity and parenting. As you become a parent, this information must be reviewed. You need to design a “blueprint.” That is, think about the messages. Keep what makes sense, and throw out what doesn't! Below are 7 additional key items to take into consideration in this process:

Understand Your Contribution to Your Child's Development. Pre-adoption, review information related to child development. A particularly useful book is [*Fatherneed: Why Father Care Is as Essential as Mother Care for Your Child*](#) by Kyle Pruett. Knowing your contribution to your child's social, emotional, cognitive and physical development tends to make fathers (and mothers) think about parenting—seriously. Parents will find themselves putting great thought into how they will parent when they understand the value of their presence in the lives of their children. Dads can ask themselves,

- How do I view my responsibilities?
- How did these views develop?
- "Now that I know my contribution, how will I alter my role as a father?"
- "What will I actually "do" to influence my child's development?"

Look at the "Quality" and "Quantity" of Time Spent with Children. It is helpful to look not only at the *quantity* of time spent with children but the *quality* as well. Children need quality and quantity of time! Ask yourself these questions, and decide if changes need to occur,

- How do you and your children spend time—chores, television, homework, playing, talking, hobbies, eating dinner together, rushing from one activity to the next?
- What types of parent-child communication occurs during time together—lecture/discipline, sharing of opinions and ideas, ethical decision making, compliments, praise, sharing of each other's day, problem-solving related discussion, exploration of feelings?
- What happens in the morning? Are both parents available? Is it a frenzy of activity? Does the family eat together or separately?
- What happens when the children arrive home from school? Is a parent home? Is there time for connecting and discussing the day? Which parent is more involved in homework? In meal prep?
- What happens at bedtime? Is there a routine? Who participates?
- Is affection given to boys and girls by fathers and mothers?
- How are children helped to express feelings? Are feelings facilitated by both parents?
- Do parents display affection, to each other, in front of the children?
- How is affection displayed by fathers and mothers? Do children perceive both parents as warm and caring?

Examining day-to-day interactions helps to identify the intimacy exhibited between children, fathers and mothers. Parents and professionals can brainstorm suggestions to increase the closeness of family members. Thus, time spent between fathers and daughters, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, mothers and sons or the whole family together will truly define and model quality and quantity time.

Recognize that You Can't Parent a Traumatized Child the Same as You were Parented. The child who arrives with a history of abuse, abandonment, institutionalization, etc. presents with control issues. Dad's often pride themselves on running a smooth household. When a problem arises, it gets fixed. When Dad makes a request, it gets carried out. The adopted son or daughter may not blend into this mold. In order to re-gain control of your home, your parenting style and techniques may need to change. We offer many posts about Behavioral Management. (See this archive category in the upper left of your screen.) Dads may also find help in the many parenting books and CDs put forth by [Love and Logic](#).

Read, read and read some more! We've posted some great books, websites, blogs, etc. in the "Readings and Resources"(right). Learning is essential to coming to terms with the changes a child with a history of trauma can bring to your family. If you don't like reading, visit [AdoptionCDs](#). This website allows you to purchase CDs of conference presentations conducted by the best professionals in adoption and attachment. Knowledge is simply the key to raising a child who has been abused, neglected or abandoned!

Be Aware of Splitting. Children who have been abandoned often treat men and woman differently. Adoptive Moms are the target of their anger and negative behaviors. Mom's dealings with the adopted son or daughter can be very different from those of the Dad. Dad may experience a pleasant, playful child. Men need to be aware of this phenomenon called "splitting." *Believe your wife!* Many marriages suffer because husbands blame their wives for the problems in the family. For a more detailed explanation of splitting, see our previous post, *Why won't You Believe Me?: Splitting in the Adoptive Home.*

Find an Outlet for Your Grief. It is profoundly sad that the son or daughter you adopted cannot function in accord with his or her age-appropriate peers. Mental health issues impair all areas of development. Academically, socially, and emotionally traumatized children lag behind. As mentioned in Part One of this post, men often harbor their emotions. Then, the son or daughter lies, steals, destroys property, etc. and those emotions explode! The home environment is in conflict. Rather, find an outlet for these feelings. Find another adoptive father, walk, take up a hobby, talk with your wife, and so on – whatever works for you! In essence, allow yourself the opportunity to feel the grief for the child you expected when you adopted.

Participated in Services. Attend therapy, psychiatric appointments, IEP meetings. Know what is going on! If you have a busy work schedule, phone conference in! Utilize email with the professionals in your child's life. Children heal better when they see a "united parenting front." Besides, you are the Dad—your input is important!